

OPEN UTOPIA

*Today we are people who know better, and
that's both a wonderful and terrible thing.*

Sam Green, *Utopia in Four Movements*

UTOPIA IS A hard sell in the twenty-first century. Today we are people who know better, and what we know are the horrors of “actually existing” Utopias of the previous century: Nazi Germany, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Maoist China, and so on in depressing repetition.¹ In each case there was a radical break with the present and a bold leap toward an imagined future; in every case the result was disastrous in terms of human cost. Thankfully, what seems to be equally consistent is that these Utopias were relatively short-lived. History, therefore, appears to prove two things: one, Utopias, once politically realized, are staggering in their brutality; and two, they are destined to fail. Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

Yet we need Utopia more than ever. We live in a time without alternatives, at “the end of history” as Frances Fukuyama would have it, when neoliberal capitalism reins triumphant and uncontested.² There are still aberrations: radical Islam in the East, neo-fascist xenophobia in the West,

and a smattering of socialist societies struggling around the globe, but by and large the only game in town is the global free market. In itself this might not be so bad, except for the increasingly obvious fact that the system is not working, not for most people and not most of the time. Income inequality has increased dramatically both between and within nations. National autonomy has become subservient to the imperatives of global economic institutions, and federal, state, and local governance are undermined by the protected power of money. Profit-driven industrialization and the headlong rush toward universal consumerism is hastening the ecological destruction of the planet. In short: the world is a mess. Opinion polls, street protests, and volatile voting patterns demonstrate widespread dissatisfaction with the current system, but the popular response so far has largely been limited to the angry outcry of *No!* No to dictators, No to corruption, No to finance capital, No to the one percent who control everything. But negation, by itself, affects nothing. The dominant system dominates not because people agree with it; it rules because we are convinced there is no alternative.

Utopia offers us a glimpse of an alternative. Utopia, broadly conceived, is an image of a world not yet in existence that is different from and better than the world we inhabit now. For the revolutionary, Utopia offers a goal to reach and a vision to be realized. For the reformer, it provides a compass point to determine what direction to move toward and a measuring stick to determine how far one has come. Utopia is politically necessary even for those who do not desire an alternative society at all. Thoughtful politics depend upon debate, and without someone or something to disagree with there is no meaningful dialogue, only an echo chamber. Utopia offers this “other,” an interlocutor with which to argue, thereby clarifying and strengthening your own ideas and ideals (even if they lead to the conclusion that Utopia is undesirable). Without a vision of an

alternative future, we can only look backwards nostalgically to the past, or unthinkingly maintain what we have, mired in the unholy apocalypse that is now. Politically, we need Utopia.

Yet there are theoretical as well as practical problems with the project. Even before the disastrous realizations of Utopia in the twentieth century, the notion of an idealized society was attacked by both radicals and conservatives. From the Left, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels famously criticized Utopians for ignoring the material conditions of the present in favor of fantasies of a future—an approach, in their estimation, that was bound to result in ungrounded and ineffectual political programs, a reactionary retreat to an idealized past, and to inevitable failure and political disenchantment. “Ultimately,” they wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, “when stubborn facts had dispersed all intoxicating effects of self-deception, this form of socialism end[s] in a miserable fit of the blues.”³ That is to say, the high of Utopianism leads, inevitably, to the crushing low of a hangover. From the Right, Edmund Burke disparaged the Utopianism of the French Revolution for refusing to take into account the realities of human nature and the accumulated wisdom of long-seated traditions. With some justification, Burke felt that such leaps into the unknown could lead only to chaos and barbarism.⁴ Diametrically opposed in nearly every other facet of political ideology, these lions of the Left and Right could agree on one thing: Utopia was a bad idea.

Between the two poles of the political spectrum, for those in the center who simply hold on to the ideal of democracy, Utopia can also be problematic. Democracy is a system in which ordinary people determine, directly or through representation, the system that governs the society they live within. Utopias, however, are usually the products of singular imaginations or, at best, the plans of a small group: a political vanguard or artistic avant-garde. Utopians too often consider people as organic

material to be shaped, not as willful agents who do the shaping; the role of the populace is, at best, to conform to a plan of a world already delivered complete. Considered a different way, Utopia is a closed program in which action is circumscribed by an algorithm coded by the master programmer. In this program there is no space for the citizen hacker. This is one reason why large-scale Utopias, made manifest, are so horrific and short-lived: short-lived because people tend not to be so pliable, and therefore insist on upsetting the perfect plans for living; horrific because people are made pliable and forced to fit the plans made for them.⁵ In Utopia the *demos* is designed, not consulted.

It is precisely the imaginative quality of Utopia—that is, the singular dream of a phantasmagorical alternative—that seems to damn the project to naïve impracticality as an ideal and megalomaniac brutality in its realization. But without political illusions, with what are we left? Disillusion, and its attendant discursive practice: criticism.⁶ Earnest, ironic, sly, or bombastic; analytic, artistic, textual, or performative; criticism has become *the* predominant political practice of intellectuals, artists, and even activists who are dissatisfied with the world of the present, and ostensibly desire something new. Criticism is also Utopia's antithesis. If Utopianism is the act of imagining what is new, criticism, derived from the Greek words *kritikos* (to judge) and perhaps more revealing, *krinein* (to separate or divide), is the practice of pulling apart, examining, and judging that which already exists.

One of the political advantages of criticism—and one of the reasons why it has become the preferred mode of political discourse in the wake of twentieth-century Utopian totalitarianism—is that it guards against the monstrous horrors of political idealism put into practice. If Utopianism is about sweeping plans, criticism is about pointed objections. The act of criticism continually undermines any attempt to project a perfect

system. Indeed, the very act of criticism is a strike against perfection: implicitly, it insists that there is always more to be done. Criticism also asks for input from others. It presupposes a dialogue between the critic and who or what they are criticizing—or, ideally, a conversation among many people, each with their own opinion. And because the need to criticize is never-ending (one can always criticize the criticism itself), politics remains fluid and open: a permanent revolution. This idea and ideal of an endless critical conversation is at the center of democratic politics, for once the conversation stops we are left with a monolithic ideal, and the only politics that is left is policing: ensuring obedience and drawing the lines between those who are part of the brave new world and those who are not.⁷ This “policing” is the essence of totalitarianism, and over the last century the good fight against systems of oppression, be they fascist, communist or capitalist, has been waged with ruthless criticism.

But criticism has run its political course. What was once a potent weapon against totalitarianism has become an empty ritual, ineffectual at best and self-delusional at worst. What happened? History. The power of criticism is based on two assumptions: first, that there is an intrinsic power and worth in knowing or revealing the *Truth*; and second, that in order to reveal the Truth, *belief*—often based in superstition, propaganda, and lies—must be debunked. Both these assumptions, however, have been undermined by relatively recent material and ideological changes.

The idea that there is a power in knowing the truth is an old one. As the Bible tells us in the Gospel of *John* (8:31–33), “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁸ What constituted “the truth” at that time was hardly the empirical fact of today—it was what we might call the supreme imaginary of the Word of God, communicated through the teachings of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, these are the seeds of an idea and ideal that knowing the answer to life’s mysteries is an intrinsic good.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁹ this faith in the power of the Truth is integral to all modern political thought and liberal-democratic politics, but it is given one of its purest popular expressions in Hans Christian Anderson's 1837 tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." The story, as you may recall from your childhood, is about an emperor who is tricked into buying a spectacular suit of non-existent clothing by a pair of charlatans posing as tailors. Eager to show it off, the Emperor parades through town in the buff as the crowd admires his imaginary attire. Then, from the sidelines, a young boy cries out: "But he has nothing on," and, upon hearing this undeniable fact, the people whisper it mouth to ear, awaken from their illusion, and live happily ever after. Is this not the primal fantasy of all critics: that if they just reveal the Truth, the scales will fall from people's eyes and all will see the world as it really is? (Which, of course, is the world as the critic sees it.)

There was once a certain logic to this faith in the power of the possession of Truth—or, through criticism, the revealing of a lie. Within an information economy where there is a scarcity of knowledge, and often a monopoly on its production and distribution, knowledge does equal power. To criticize the official Truth was to strike a blow at church of state's monopoly over meaning. Critique was a decidedly political act, and the amount of effort spent by church and state in acts of censorship suggests its political efficacy. But we do not exist in this world anymore. We live in what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard named "the post-modern condition," marked by the "death of the master narrative," in which Truth (or the not so Noble Lie) no longer speaks in one voice or resides in one location.¹⁰

The postmodern condition, once merely an academic hypothesis pondered by an intellectual elite, is now, in the Internet age, the lived experience of the multitude. On any social or political issue there are hundreds,

thousands, even millions of truths being claimed. There are currently 1 trillion unique URLs on the World Wide Web, accessed by 2 billion Google searches a day. There are more than 70 million videos posted on YouTube, and about 30 billion tweets have been sent. The worldwide count of blogs alone exceeds 130 million, each with a personalized perspective and most making idiosyncratic claims.¹¹ Even the great modern gatekeepers of the Truth—the BBC, CNN, and other “objective” news outlets—have been forced to include user-generated content and comment boards on their sites, with the result that no singular fact or opinion stands alone or remains unchallenged.

It was the great Enlightenment invention of the Encyclopedia that democratized Truth—but only in relation to its reception. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia with its 3.5 million-and-counting entries in English alone has democratized the *production* of truths.¹² This process is not something hidden, but is part of the presentation itself. Each Wikipedia page is headed by a series of tabs that, when clicked, display the encyclopedia entry itself, public discussion about the definition provided, the history of the entry’s production, and a final tab, “edit this page,” where a reader has the chance to become a (co)producer of knowledge by editing and rewriting the original entry. In Wikipedia the Truth is transformed from something that *is* into something that is *becoming*: built, transformed, and revised; never stable and always fluid: truth with a small “t.”

Today’s informational economy is no longer one of monopoly or scarcity—it is an abundance of truth . . . and of critique. When power is wielded through a monopoly on Truth, then a critical assault makes a certain political sense, but singularity has now been replaced by plurality. There is no longer a communications citadel to be attacked and silenced, only an endless plain of chatter, and the idea of criticizing a solitary Truth, or swapping one for the other—the Emperor wears clothes/the Emperor

wears no clothes—has become increasingly meaningless. As the objects of criticism multiply, criticism's power and effect directly diminish.

Criticism is also contingent upon belief. We often think of belief as that which is immune to critique. It is the individual or group that is absolutely confident—religious fundamentalists in today's world, or totalitarian communists or fascists of the last century; that is, those who possess what we call blind belief, which criticism cannot touch. This is not so, for it is only for those who truly believe that criticism still matters. Criticism threatens to undermine the very foundation of existence for those who build their lives on the edifice of belief. To question, and thus entertain doubt, undermines the certainty necessary for thoroughgoing belief. This is why those with such fervent beliefs are so hell-bent on suppressing their critics.

But can one say, in most of the world today, that anyone consciously *believes* in “the system”? Look, for instance, at the citizens of the United States and their opinions about their economic system. In 2009, the major US pollster Rasmussen Reports stated that only a marginal majority of Americans—53 percent—believe that capitalism is a better system than socialism.¹³ This finding was mirrored by a poll conducted a year later by the widely respected Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, in which only 52 percent of Americans expressed a favorable opinion of capitalism.¹⁴ Just a reminder: these polls were taken after the fall of the Soviet Union and the capitalist transformation of China, in a country with no anti-capitalist party, where the mass media lauds the free market and suggests no alternatives, and where anti-communism was raised to an art form. This lack of faith in the dominant system of capitalism is mirrored worldwide. A BBC World Service poll, also from 2009, found that across twenty-seven (capitalist) countries, only 11 percent of the public thought free-market capitalism was working well. Asked if they

thought that capitalism “is fatally flawed and a different economic system is needed,” 23 percent of the 29,000 people surveyed answered in the affirmative, with the proportion of discontents growing to 35 percent in Brazil, 38 percent in Mexico, and 43 percent in France.¹⁵

My anti-capitalist friends are thrilled with these reports. Surely we’re waiting for the Great Leap Forward. I hate to remind them, however, that if the system is firmly in control, it no longer needs belief: it functions on routine . . . and the absence of imagination. That is to say, when ideology becomes truly hegemonic, you no longer need to believe. The reigning ideology is everything: the sun, the moon, the stars; there is simply nothing outside—no alternative—to imagine.¹⁶ Citizens no longer need to believe in or desire capitalism in order to go along with it, and dissatisfaction with the system, as long as it is leveled as a critique of the system rather than providing an alternative, matters little. Indeed, criticism of neoliberal capitalism is a part of the system itself—not as a healthy check on power as many critics might like to believe, but as a demonstration of the sort of plurality necessary in a democratic age for complete hegemonic control.

I am reminded of the massive protests that flooded the streets before the US invasion of Iraq. On February 15, 2003 more than a million people marched in New York City, while nearly 10 million demonstrated worldwide. What was the response of then president George W. Bush? He calmly and publicly acknowledged the mass demonstration as a sign that the system was working, saying, “Democracy’s a beautiful thing . . . people are allowed to express their opinion, and I welcome people’s right to say what they believe.”¹⁷ This was spin and reframing, but it got at a fundamental truth. Bush needed the protest to make his case for a war of (Western) freedom and liberty versus (Arab) repression and intolerance. Ironically, he also needed the protest to legitimize the war itself. In the modern imagination *real* wars always have dissent; now that Bush

had a protest, he had a genuine war. Although it pains me to admit this, especially as I helped organize the demonstration in New York, anti-war protest and critique has become an integral part of war.

When a system no longer needs to base its legitimacy on the *conscious* belief of its subjects—indeed, no longer has to legitimize itself at all—the critical move to debunk belief by revealing it as something based on lies no longer retains its intended political effect. This perspective is not universally recognized, as is confirmed by a quick perusal of oppositional periodicals, be they liberal or conservative. In each venue there will be criticisms of official truth and the positing of counter-truths. In each there exist a thousand young boys yelling out: “But he has no clothes!” To no avail. The debunking of belief may continue for eternity as a tired and impotent ritual of political subjectivity—something to make us think and feel as if we are really challenging power—but its efficacy is nil.

Dystopia, Utopia’s doppelganger, speaks directly to the crisis in belief, for dystopias conjure up a world in which no one wants to believe. Like Utopias, dystopias are an image of an alternative world, but here the similarities end. Dystopian imaginaries, while positing a scenario set in the future, always return to the present with a critical impulse—suggesting what must be curtailed if the world is not to end up the way it is portrayed. Dystopia is therefore less an imagination of what might be than a revealing of the hidden logic of what already is. Confronted with a vision of our horrific future, dystopia’s audience is supposed to see the Truth—that our present course is leading us to the rocks of disaster—and, having woken up, now act. Dystopic faith in revelation and the power of the (hidden) truth makes common cause with traditional criticism, and suffers the same liabilities.

Furthermore, the political response generated by dystopia is always a conservative one: stop the so-called progress of civilization in its course

and . . . and what? Where do we go from here? We do not know because we have neither been offered a vision of a world to hope for nor encouraged to believe that things could get better. In this way dystopias, even as they are often products of fertile imagination, deter imagination in others. The two options presented to the audience are either to accept the dystopic future as it is represented, or turn back to the present and keep this future from happening. In neither case is there a place for imagining a desirable alternative.

Finally, the desire encouraged through dystopic spectatorship is perverse. We seem to derive great satisfaction from vicariously experiencing our world destroyed by totalitarian politics, rapacious capitalism, runaway technology, or ecological disaster; and dystopic scenarios—*1984*, *Brave New World*, *Blade Runner*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Matrix*, *2012*—have proved far more popular in our times than any comparable Utopic text. Contemplating the haunting beauty of dystopic art, like Robert Graves and Didier Madoc-Jones's recent "London Futures" show at the Museum of London in which the capital of England lies serenely under seven meters of water,¹⁸ brings to mind the famous phrase of Walter Benjamin, that our "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."¹⁹ While such dystopic visions are, no doubt, sincerely created to instigate collective action, I suspect what they really inspire is a sort of solitary satisfaction in hopelessness. In recent years a new word has entered our vocabulary to describe this very effect: "disasterbation."²⁰

So here we are, stuck between the Devil and the deep blue sea, with a decision to make. Either we drift about, leveling critiques with no critical effect and reveling in images of our impending destruction—living a life of political bad faith as we desire to make a difference yet do not—or we approach the Devil. It is not much of a choice. If we want to change

the world, we need to abandon the political project of pure criticism and strike out in a new direction. That is, we need to make our peace with Utopia. This cannot happen by pretending that Utopia's demons do not exist—creating a Utopia of Utopia; instead it means candidly acknowledging the problems with Utopia, and then deciding whether the ideal is still salvageable. This revaluation is essential, as it is one thing to conclude that criticism is politically impotent, but quite another to suggest that, in the long shadow of its horrors, we resurrect the project of Utopianism.

“Today we are people who know better, and that's both a wonderful and terrible thing.”²¹ When Sam Green presents this line in his performance of *Utopia in Four Movements* it is meant as a sort of lament that our knowledge of Utopia's horrors cannot allow us ever again to have such grand dreams. This knowledge is wonderful in that there will be no large-scale atrocities in the name of idealism; it is terrible in that we no longer have the capacity to envision an alternative. But we needn't be so pessimistic; perhaps “knowing better” offers us a perspective from which we can re-examine and re-approach the idea and ideal of Utopia. “Knowing better” allows us to ask questions that are essential if Utopia is to be a viable political project.

The paramount question, I believe, is whether or not Utopia can be *opened up*—to criticism, to participation, to modification, and to re-creation.²² It is only a Utopia like this that will be resistant to the ills that have plagued the project: its elite envisioning, its single-minded execution, and its unyielding manifestation. An Open Utopia that is democratic in its conception and protean in its realization gives us a chance to escape the nightmare of history and start imagining anew.

Another question must also be addressed: How is Utopia to come about? Utopia as a philosophical ideal or a literary text entails no input other than that of its author, and no commitment other than time and

interest on the part of its readers; but Utopia as the basis of an alternative society requires the participation of its population. In the past people were forced to accept plans for an alternative society, but this is the past we are trying to escape. If we reject the anti-democratic, politics-from-above model that has haunted past Utopias, can the public be persuaded to ponder such radical alternatives themselves? In short, now that “we are people who know better,” can we be convinced to give Utopia another chance?

These are vexing questions. Their answers, however, have been there all along, from the very beginning, in Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

When More wrote *Utopia*, in the early sixteenth century, he was not the first writer to have imagined a better world. The author owed a heavy literary debt to Plato’s *Republic*, wherein Socrates lays out his blueprint for a just society. But he was also influenced by the political and social imaginings of classic authors like Plutarch, Sallust, Tacitus, Cicero, and Seneca, with all of whom an erudite Renaissance Humanist like More would have been on intimate terms. The ideal of a far-off land operating according to foreign, and often alluring principles was also a stock-in-trade in the tales of travel popular at the time. The travelogues of Sir John Mandeville were bestsellers (albeit among a limited literate class) in the fourteenth century, and adventurer’s tales, like those of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century explorer Amerigo Vespucci, were familiar to More. Most important, the Bible—the master-text of More’s European home—provided images of mythical-historical lands flowing with milk and honey, and glimpses of a world beyond where the lion lays down with the lamb.

By the time More sat down to write his book, envisioning alternative worlds was a well-worn literary tradition, but *Utopia* literally named the practice. One need not have read his book, or even know that such

a book exists, to be familiar with the word, and “Utopia” has entered the popular lexicon to represent almost any positive ideal of a society. But, given how commonly the word is used and how widely it is applied, *Utopia* is an exceedingly curious book, and much less straightforward than one might think.

Utopia is actually two books, written separately and published together in 1516 (along with a great deal of ancillary material: maps, marginalia, and dedications contributed by members of Renaissance Europe’s literary establishment). Book I is the story of More meeting and entering into a discussion with the traveler Raphael Hythloday; Book II is Hythloday’s description of the land to which he has traveled—the Isle of Utopia. Scholars disagree about exactly how much of Book I was in More’s mind when he wrote Book II, but all agree that Book II was written first in 1515, while the author was waiting around on a futile diplomatic mission in the Netherlands, and Book I was written a year later, in his home in London.²³ Chronology of creation aside, the reader of *Utopia* encounters Book I before Book II, so this is how we too shall start.

Book I of *Utopia* opens with More introducing himself as a character and taking on the role of narrator. He tells the reader that he has been sent to Flanders on a diplomatic mission for the king of England, and introduces us to his friend Peter Giles, who is living in Antwerp. All this is based in fact: More was sent on such a mission by Henry VIII in 1515, and Peter Giles, in addition to being the author’s friend, was a well-known Flemish literary figure. Soon, however, More mixes fiction into his facts by describing a meeting with Raphael Hythloday, “a stranger, who seemed past the flower of his age; his face was tanned, he had a long beard, and his cloak was hanging carelessly about him, so that, by his looks and habit, I concluded he was a seaman.” While the description is vivid and matter-of-fact, there are hints that this might not be the type of

voyager who solely navigates the material plane. Giles explains to More that Hythloday “has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveler, or rather a philosopher.” Yet it is revealed a few lines later that the (fictional) traveler has been in the company of the (factual) explorer Amerigo Vespucci, whose party he left to venture off and discover the (fictional) Island of Utopia. This promiscuous mix of reality and fantasy sets the tone for *Utopia*. From the beginning we, the readers, are thrown off balance: Who and what should we take seriously?

Returning to the story: introductions are made, and the three men strike up a conversation. The discussion turns to More’s native country, and Hythloday describes a (fictional) dinner conversation at the home of (the factual) John Morton, Catholic Cardinal, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England, on the harsh laws of England which, at the time, condemned persons to death for the most minor of crimes. At the dinner party Hythloday assumes the role of critic, arguing against such laws in particular and the death penalty in general. He begins by insisting that crime must be understood and addressed at a societal level. Inheritance laws, for instance, leave all heirs but the first son propertyless, and thus financially desperate. Standing armies and frequent wars result in the presence of violent and restless soldiers, who move easily into crime; and the enclosure of once common lands forces commoners to criminal measures to supplement their livelihood. Hythloday then finds a fault in juridical logic. Enforcing the death penalty for minor crimes, he points out, only encourages major ones, as the petty thief might as well kill their victim as have them survive as a possible witness. Turning his attention upward, Hythloday then claims that capital punishment is hubris against the Divine, for only God has the right to take a human life. Having thus argued for a sense of justice grounded on earth as well as in the heavens, he concludes: “If you do not find a remedy to these evils it

is a vain thing to boast of the severity in punishing theft, which, though it might have the appearance of justice, yet in itself is neither just nor convenient.” It is a blistering critique and a persuasive performance.

The crowd around the archbishop’s dinner table, however, is not persuaded. A lawyer present immediately replies with a pedantic non-reply that merely sums up Hythloday’s arguments. A fool makes a foolish suggestion, trolling only for laughs. And a friar, the butt of the fool’s jokes, becomes indignant and begins quoting scripture willy-nilly to justify his outrage, engaging in tit-for-tat with the fool, and thus derailing the discussion entirely. The only person Hythloday seems to reach is Morton, who adds his own ideas about the proper treatment of vagabonds. But this thoughtful contribution, too, is devalued when the company assembled—motivated not by logic but by sycophancy—slavishly agree with the archbishop. As a Socratic dialogue, a model More no doubt had in mind, the dinner party discussion bombs. Hythloday convinces no one with his logic, fails to engage all but one of his interlocutors, and moves us no closer to the Platonic ideal of Justice. In short, Hythloday, as a critic, is ineffectual.

And not for the only time. Hythloday makes another critical intervention later in Book I, this time making his case directly to More and Giles. Here the topic is private property, which Hythloday believes to be at the root of all society’s ills, crime included. “I must freely own,” he reasons, “that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily . . .” Alas, while Hythloday has convinced himself, he is the only one, for there are no ears for his thoughts. More immediately counters with the oft-heard argument that without property to gain and inequality as a spur, humans will become lazy, and Giles responds with a proto-Burkean defense of tradition. Again, Hythloday’s attempts at critical persuasion fail.

Hythloday concludes that critical engagement is pointless. And when More suggests that he, with his broad experience and strong opinions, become a court counselor, Hythloday dismisses the idea. Europeans, he argues, are resistant to new ideas. Princes are deaf to philosophy and are more concerned with making war than hearing ideals for peace. And courts are filled with men who admire only their own ideas and are envious of others. More, himself unconvinced by Hythloday up until now, finally agrees with him. “One is never to offer propositions or advice that we are certain will not be entertained,” he concurs, adding that, “Discourses so much out of the road could not avail anything, nor have any effect on men whose minds were prepossessed with different sentiments.”

But More does not counsel despair and disengagement—he suggests an alternative strategy of persuasion. The problem is not with Hythloday’s arguments themselves, but with the form in which he presents them. One cannot simply present radical ideas that challenge people’s basic assumptions about the world in the form of a reasoned argument, for no one wants to be *told* they are wrong. “There is another philosophy,” More explains, “that is more pliable, that knows its proper scene, [and] accommodates itself to it.” He goes on to use the example of drama, explaining how an actor must adapt to the language and the setting of the play if his lines are to make sense to the audience. If the drama is a light comedy, More explains, then it makes little sense to play one’s part as if it were a serious tragedy, “For you spoil and corrupt the play that is in hand when you mix with it things of an opposite nature, even though they are much better. Therefore,” he continues, “go through with the play that is acting the best you can, and do not confound it because another that is pleasanter comes into your thoughts.”

More makes it clear that his dramaturgical advice is meant to be taken politically. He tells Hythloday: “You are not obliged to assault people

with discourses that are out of their road when you see that their received notions must prevent your making an impression on them.” Instead, he counsels, “you ought rather to cast about and to manage things with all the dexterity in your power.” This time, however, it is Hythloday’s turn to be unswayed by argument. He interprets More’s proposal as an invitation to dissemble and rejects it forthwith: “as for lying, whether a philosopher can do it or not I cannot tell: I am sure I cannot do it.”

This revealing exchange may be understood in several ways. The most common reading among *Utopia* scholars is that More’s advice to Hythloday is an argument for working within the system, to “go through with the play that is acting the best you can,” and to abandon a confrontational style of criticism in favor of “another philosophy that is more pliable, that knows its proper scene, [and] accommodates itself.” To be successful, More seems to counsel, one must cast oneself within “the play that is acting”—that is, the status quo—and “accommodate” one’s ideas to the dominant discourse. Shortly before writing *Utopia*, More had been asked by Henry VIII to enter his service as a counselor, and he was still contemplating the offer while at work on the book. It is thus easy to imagine this whole discussion as a debate within his own head. More’s conclusion—that to be effective one needs to put aside the high-minded posturing of the critic and embrace the pliability of politics—can be understood as an early rationalization for his own decision to join the king’s council two years later, in 1518.²⁴ (A decision that was literally to cost the man his head in 1535, when he—high-mindedly—refused to bless Henry VIII’s divorce and split from the Catholic Church.) Another popular interpretation of this passage proposes that More is merely trotting out the standard classical arguments in defense of the practice of rhetoric: know your audience, cater to their preferences, and so forth.²⁵ Hythloday, in turn, gives the classic rebuttal: the Truth is fixed and

eternal. It's the debate between Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* and Plato in *Gorgias*, retold.

While not discounting either of these interpretations, I want to suggest another: that More—the character and the author—is making a case for the political futility of direct criticism. What he calls for in its place is a technique of persuasion that circumvents the obstacles that Hythloday describes: tradition, narrow-mindedness, and a simple resistance on the part of the interlocutor to being told what to think. More knows that, while the critic may be correct, their criticism can often fall on deaf ears—as it did in all of Hythloday's attempts. What is needed is another model of political discourse; not rhetoric with its moral relativity, nor simply altering one's opinions so they are acceptable to those in power, but something else entirely. Where is this alternative to be found? Answering this question entails taking More's dramatic metaphor seriously.

The play's the thing. What drama does is create a counter-world to the here and now. Plays fashion a space and place which can look and feel like reality, yet is not beholden to its limitations; it is, literally, a stage on which imagination becomes reality. A successful play, according to the Aristotelian logic with which More would have been familiar, is one in which the audience loses themselves in the drama: its world becomes theirs. The world of the play is experienced and internalized and thus, to a certain degree and for a limited time, naturalized. The alternative becomes the norm. Whereas alternatives presented through criticism are often experienced by the audience as external to the dominant logic, as “discourses that are out of their road,” the same arguments advanced within the alternative reality of the play *become* the dominant logic. Importantly, this logic is not merely approached cognitively, as a set of abstract precepts, but experienced viscerally, albeit vicariously, as a set of principles put into practice.²⁶

What works on the stage might also serve in the stateroom. By presenting views at odds with the norm the critic begins at a disadvantage; he or she is the perpetual outsider, always operating from the margins, trying to convince people that what they know as the Truth might be false, and what they hold to be reality is just one perspective among many. This marginal position not only renders persuasion more difficult but, paradoxically, reinforces the centrality of the norm. The margins, by definition, are bound to the center, and the critic, in their act of criticism, re-inscribes the importance of the world they take issue with. Compared to the critic, the courtier has an easier time of it. The courtier, as a yes man, operates within the boundaries of accepted reality. They needn't make reasoned appeals to the intellect at all, they merely restate the "obvious": what is already felt, known and experienced. The courtier has no interest in offering an alternative or even providing genuine advice; their function is merely to reinforce the status quo.

"Casting about," or the "indirect approach" as it is elsewhere translated,²⁷ provides More with a third position that transcends critic and courtier—one that allows an individual to offer critical advice without being confined to the margins. Instead of countering reality as the critic does, or accepting a reality already given like the courtier, this person creates their own reality. This individual—let us call them an artist—conjures up a full-blown lifeworld that operates according to different axioms. Like Hamlet staging the murder of his father before an audience of the court and the eyes of his treacherous uncle, the artist maneuvers the spectator into a position where they see their world in a new light. The persuasive advantages of this strategy should be obvious. Instead of being the outsider convincing people that what they know to be right is wrong, the artist creates a new context for what is right and lets people experience it for themselves. Instead of negating reality, they

create a new one. No longer an outsider, this artist occupies center stage in their own creation, imagining and then describing a place where their ideals already exist, and then inviting their audience to experience it with them. Book I—a damning critique of direct criticism—ends with this more hopeful hint at an alternative model of persuasion. Book II is More’s demonstration of this technique; his political artistry in practice.

The second book of *Utopia* begins with Raphael Hythloday taking over the role of narrator and, like the first book, opens with a detailed description of the setting in order to situate the reader. Unlike the real Flanders described by More in Book I, however, the location that Hythloday depicts is a purely imaginary space:

The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it, but it grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent. Between its horns the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbor, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce.

Like the coordinates of the Garden of Eden—located at the mythical juncture of the real rivers Pison, Gihon, Hid’dekel, and Euphrates—this description lends a physical veracity to what is a fantasy, a technique that More will employ throughout. After this physical description of the island, Hythloday begins his almost encyclopedic account of the customs and constitution of Utopia. Highlights include: an elected government

and priesthood, freedom of speech and religion, public health and education, an economy planned for the good of all, compassionate justice and little crime, and, perhaps most Utopian of all, no lawyers: “a sort of people whose profession it is to disguise matters and wrest the laws.”

The people who populate Utopia are kind and generous, and shoulder their responsibility for the general welfare as the natural order of things. They always have work, yet also enjoy a great deal of leisure, which they spend in discussion, music, or attending public lectures (alas, gambling, beer halls, and wine bars are unknown in Utopia). There is ideological indoctrination, to be sure, but even this is idealized: the Utopians begin each communal meal with a reading on a moral topic, “but it is so short that it is not tedious.” The various cities of Utopia function in harmony with one another, and if one district has a surplus of crops or other goods, these are redirected toward cities which have a deficit, “so that indeed the whole island is, as it were, one family.”

At the root of Utopia, the source from which everything grows is the community of property.²⁸ The quality of this society is best described thus:

[E]very house has both a door to the street and a back door to the garden. Their doors have all two leaves, which, as they are easily opened, so they shut of their own accord; and, there being no property among them, every man may freely enter into any house whatsoever.²⁹

For “though no man has any thing, yet they are all rich.”

Utopia is More’s sixteenth-century Europe turned upside-down. This inversion of the real is best illustrated in one of the few anecdotes that Hythloday narrates—a visit to the island by a group of foreign ambassadors.

The Anemolians, as they are called, had never traveled to Utopia before, and were unfamiliar with the local customs. “[T]hey, being a vainglorious rather than a wise people, resolved to set themselves out with so much pomp that they should look like gods, and strike the eyes of the poor Utopians with their splendor.” Dressed for success, the Anemolian ambassadors wear cloth made from gold and drape heavy gold chains around their necks, while gold rings adorn their fingers and strings of gems and pearls hang from their caps. But in Utopia, Hythloday tells us, such wealth and finery signify differently. Gold is what the chains and shackles of slaves are made from, and jewels are considered children’s playthings: pretty to look at, but valued much as marbles or dolls are by us. Utopians craft their dinnerware from everyday clay and glass, saving their gold and silver to fashion implements for another part of the nutritional process: chamber pots (“O magnificent debasement of gold!” is written in the marginalia at this point in the text). Ignorant of the Utopians as they are, the Anemolian ambassadors make their public appearance bedecked in their finery. The Utopians, confused, bow to the humblest and most simply dressed of the Anemolian party and ignore the leaders, who they believe to be slaves. In a moment anticipating “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” a child, spying the ambassadors, calls out to his mother: “See that great fool, that wears pearls and gems as if he were yet a child!” To which the mother answers: “Hold your peace! This, I believe, is one of the ambassadors’ fools.”

This anecdote, along with the rest of Hythloday’s description of Utopia in Book II, does what Hythloday in Book I cannot: it presents the world of the Utopians in such a way that the reader confronts these radical ideas as the norm to which their own world is an aberration. More, through Hythloday, thereby moves the margins into the center, and forces skeptics to the margins; the alternative occupies center stage. In a word, More “naturalizes” his imagined Utopia.

At various points throughout Book II, Hythloday comments upon the contextuality of the “natural.” The Utopians share the same days, months and years as the book’s audience, as these are rooted in physical laws of the universe, but “man is a changeable creature,” as Hythloday asserts, and the behavior of the Utopians is the result of their society’s beliefs and institutions. Indeed, the idea that the social can shape the natural extends even to animals: at one point Hythloday explains how the Utopians use artificial incubation to hatch their chicks, and “they are no sooner out of the shell, and able to stir about, but they seem to consider those [humans] that feed them as their mothers, and follow them as other chickens do the hen that hatched them.”

If there is little crime in Utopia, it is not because the Utopians are inherently more law-abiding, but because there is a rational criminal justice system at work and no private property to be gained or lost in theft. Hythloday makes the same argument about crime and private property as he does in Book I, but in Book II he is more persuasive (at least, no one interrupts to tell him he is wrong) because he *shows* the world as it might be instead of *telling* people what is wrong with the world as it is. Through the imaginative space of *Utopia*, More has assembled a new context for his readers to approach old, seemingly intractable social problems and imagine new solutions.

But what sort of a space is this? As many know, Utopia is a made-up word composed by More from the Greek words *ou* (not) and *topos* (place). It is a space which is, literally, *no place*. Furthermore, the storyteller of this magic land is named Raphael Hythloday, or “Hythlodæus” in the Latin in which More wrote. The root of this surname is the Greek *huthlos*, a word used frequently by Plato, meaning nonsense or idle talk.³⁰ So here we are, being told the story of a place which is named out of existence, by a narrator who is named as unreliable. And these are just two of the

countless paradoxes, enigmas, and jokes scattered throughout the text. And so begins the big debate among *Utopia* scholars: Is the entirety of More's *Utopia* a satire, an exercise demonstrating the absurdity of proposing political, social and economic alternatives to the status quo? Or is this story of an idyllic society an earnest effort to suggest and promote such ideals?³¹

There is suggestive evidence for More's sincerity. More is at pains to lend a sense of veracity to the story. He very clearly situates it within the context of his own—verifiable—trip to Flanders in 1515, and scatters the names of well-known contemporaries throughout the book: Peter Giles, Archbishop Morton, Amerigo Vespucci, and others. As you will remember, More provides painstakingly detailed descriptions of Utopia, beginning with Hythloday's description of the landscape of the island. The first printings of *Utopia* contained an illustrated map of the nation, and Giles, More's friend and fellow "witness" to Hythloday's tale, supplied a Utopian alphabet.

Again and again More goes out of his way to try to persuade his readers that Utopia is a real place. In a prefatory letter from More to Giles, also included in the first editions, More asks his friend for help in remembering the *exact* length of a bridge that Hythloday mentions in his description, for while his job as "author" was a simple one—"only to rehearse those things which you and I together heard Master Raphael tell and declare"—and "there remained no other thing for me to do but only write plainly the matter as I heard it spoken," he humbly admits his memory may be in doubt. More remembers hearing that the bridge was half a mile, or 500 paces long, but fears he might be in error, because he also recalls "the river contains there not above three hundred paces in breadth." More wants to get his facts right. Yes, such suggestions of facticity were a common literary device at the time, yet they also add a

veneer of veracity to the entire account. More's memory might be faulty, but the place which he is remembering is undeniably real. As More comments to Giles in the same letter, "I shall take good heed that there be in my book nothing false, so if there be anything in doubt I will rather tell a lie than make a lie, because I had rather be good than wise [wily]." Why would More expend so much effort making a case for the actual existence of a place like Utopia if he did not want it to be taken seriously by his audience?

While it stretches credulity to suggest that More expects his audience to fully believe that Utopia is real, it is reasonable to argue that he uses fantasy to articulate political, economic, and religious alternatives he sincerely believes in. For instance, Hythloday mentions in Book II that the Utopians, when told about Christianity, approved of the religion as it "seemed so favorable to that community of goods, which is an opinion so particular as was well as so dear to them; since they perceived that Christ and His followers lived by that rule." More, a devout Christian who once studied for the priesthood and would later give his life to honor his beliefs, had every reason to be sincere about the community of goods described in Utopia. Given who he was and what he believed, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine More satirizing Jesus and his followers.³²

The surname of the narrator of Utopia, Hythloday, may translate as "speaker of nonsense," but his Christian name, Raphael, finds its genesis in the Archangel Raphael, who gives sight to the blind. *Raphael* Hythloday might therefore be recognized as a guide to help the reader see a greater truth. What obvious absurdities *Utopia* does contain—chamber pots made of precious metals, for example—could be understood as a way to throw into sharp relief the corruptions of contemporary Christendom. Less charitably, such silliness could be seen as a sort of political cover for airing heretical political and religious views. By salting his tale with

absurdities, More can suggest these radical ideas yet at the same time politically distance himself from them. He has his cake and eats it too.

To sum up this perspective: More was serious about *Utopia*. He was earnest in his appreciation of the manners, customs, and laws of the Utopians, and used realism in order to convey a sense of genuine possibility. Just as the number of cities in Utopia matches the number of counties in England and Wales in More's time, Utopia was meant to be experienced by the reader as a valid alternative to the real world in which they lived.³³

On the other hand, there is also evidence that More meant his *Utopia* to be read as a satire. In recent years, revisionist *Utopia* scholars have claimed that, far from being a sincere vision of the society we ought to have, the author used his imagined island as an extended argument for why such utopian visions are, literally, a joke. In addition to the destabilizing names given to the place and the narrator, More, in his description of the island of Utopia, makes attractive possibilities that he—given his personal, economic, political, and religious position in life—would be expected to be dead set against. He was a man, lawyer, property-holder, future king's councilor, lord chancellor, and dogmatic defender of the faith, yet the island he describes has female equality, communal property, democratic governance, religious freedom, and no lawyers. This seems quite a contradiction. Indeed, in his later life More penned works attacking the very religious tolerance extolled in *Utopia*, and as Lord Chancellor, a position he attained in 1529, he investigated religious dissenters and presided over the burning at the stake of a half-dozen prominent Protestant "heretics." In this light, More's conscious use of the absurd in *Utopia* can be interpreted as undercutting the radical ideas advanced in his book, and the silliness of many of the customs and characteristics of Utopia taint any such idea of an ideal society. By inserting a political vision of an

ideal world within a society that also uses chamber pots made of gold and silver, for instance, More effectively ridicules *all* political idealization.

More was a devout Christian, but (with his friend Erasmus) he was also a translator of the second-century Greek writer Lucian, a man known for his satirical and skeptical dialogues, and *Utopia* is stuffed with erudite irony that calls into question the sincerity of the story. For example, at one point Hythloday recalls how, in European and other Christian countries, political treaties and alliances are religiously observed as “sacred and inviolable! Which is partly owing to the justice and goodness of the princes themselves, and partly to the reverence they pay to the popes.” This sentence works in the book because More’s audience knows that the exact opposite is true: alliances and treaties were routinely broken by both church and state, and princes and popes were frequently neither just nor good.³⁴ Given this, how are we to take anything that Hythloday says at face value?

The detailed descriptions of Utopian landmarks that give the account its sense of realism are likewise undermined by More’s use of humor. In the same prefatory letter to his friend Giles, in which he worries that he might not have his facts straight about the length of a bridge, More arrives at a solution to his dilemma: “Wherefore, I most earnestly desire you, friend Peter, to talk with Hythloday, if you can face to face, or else write letters to him, and so to work in this matter that in this, my book, there may be neither anything be found that is untrue, neither anything be lacking which is true.” The humor here comes in the realization that Hythloday will never contradict anything More writes, because Hythloday simply does not exist; there will be no fact-checking of *Utopia*, because there is no one to contact to check the facts.³⁵ An equally silly explanation for the impossibility of pinpointing Utopia on a world map is given by his friend Peter Giles who, in another letter appended to the

early printings of *Utopia*, apologizes for the absence of coordinates by explaining that, at the exact moment that Hythloday was conveying the location to More and himself, someone nearby coughed loudly (!) and the traveler's words were lost.

In his ancillary letters More takes issue with his contemporaries who claim that *Utopia* is just a farce, but his arguments are themselves farcical. In a letter attached to the 1517 edition, he defends the facticity of his account, explaining to his friend Giles that, if *Utopia* were merely fiction, he would have had the wit and sense to offer clues to tip off his learned audience. "Thus," he states,

if I had put nothing but the names of prince, river, city and island such as might suggest to the learned that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the prince without a people, this would not have been hard to do, and would have been much wittier than what I did; for if the faithfulness of an historian had not been binding on me, I am not so stupid as to have preferred to use those barbarous and meaningless names, Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot and Ademus.

The irony here, which the knowing reader would certainly get, is that this is exactly what More has done: Utopia, the name of the island, means nowhere; Amaurot, the Utopian city described, means phantom, and so on. How are we to take More seriously?

Approaching *Utopia* ironically changes the meaning of More's words, and what seemed sincere now appears sarcastic. When More comments to Giles, "I shall take good heed that there be in my book nothing false, so if there be anything in doubt I will rather tell a lie than make a lie," it

is not an earnest declaration of his search for the truth, but a sly acknowledgement that he may be *telling* the reader a lie. The tokens of veracity I describe above—the debate over the bridge, the Utopian alphabet, the maps and so forth—far from being evidence for More’s sincerity, can be seen from this perspective as supporting materials for one big prank.

Evidence that More’s *Utopia* was meant to be understood as an erudite prank can also be found in the ancillary material written by More’s friends. In a letter from Jerome de Busleyden to More, Busleyden praises *Utopia*, especially as “it withholds itself from the many, and only imparts itself to the few.” In other words, only the learned few will get the truth of *Utopia*: that it is a joke. This interpretation is reinforced by another letter included along with the text, this one from *Utopia* publisher Beatus Rhenanus to the wealthy Humanist (and adviser to Emperor Maximillain on literary matters) Willibald Pirckheimer. After describing how one man, among a gathering of “a number of serious men,” argued that More deserved no credit for *Utopia* as he was no more than a paid scribe for Hythloday and none of the ideas were his own, Rhenanus switches from Latin to the even more rarefied Greek to write: “Do you not, then, welcome this very cleverness of More, who leads such men as these astray?”

Within the text, the character of More himself is not even convinced that what Hythloday has related is real. When, at the very end of Book II, More returns to the text as narrator, he tells the reader: “When Raphael had thus made an end of speaking . . . many things occurred to me, both concerning the manners and laws of that people, that seemed very absurd.” More then lists a few of these absurdities: the Utopians’ manner of waging war, their religious practices, “but chiefly,” he states, “what seemed the foundation of all the rest, their living in common, without the use of money, by which all nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty, which, according to the common opinion, are the true ornaments

of a nation, would be quite taken away.” In having More (the character) remain unconvinced at the end of Hythloday’s story, More (the writer) seems to be rejecting not only the political vision of Utopia, but also the mode of persuasion that he suggested to Raphael in Book I. Utopia is indeed No-Place.

But there are more than two sides to the story of *Utopia*. While good arguments for both the satirical and sincere interpretations of the text can be made, I believe this binary debate obfuscates rather than clarifies the meaning of More’s work, and actually misses the political genius of *Utopia* entirely. The brilliance of More’s *Utopia* is that it is simultaneously satirical *and* sincere, absurd *and* earnest, and it is through the combination of these seemingly opposite ways of presenting ideals that a more fruitful way of thinking about political imagination can start to take shape.³⁶ It is the presentation of Utopia as *no place*, and its narrator as *nonsense*, that creates a space for the reader’s imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be, and what a radically different sensibility might be like. In enabling this dialectical operation, *Utopia* opens up Utopia, encouraging the reader to imagine for themselves.

More’s second letter to his co-conspirator Peter Giles, which appears only in the 1517 edition, hints that this *open* reading of *Utopia* is what he hoped to provoke. The letter begins with More writing about an anonymous (and possibly invented) “clever person” who has read his text and offers the following criticism: “[I]f the facts are reported as true, I see some absurdities in them; but if fictitious, I find More’s finished judgment in some respects wanting.” More then goes on to write about this “sharp-eyed critic” that “by his frank criticism he has obliged me more than anyone else since the appearance of the book.” What to make of this curious criticism and More’s appreciation of it?

I believe it is this ideal reader's refusal to wholly accept *Utopia* as fact, yet also his dissatisfaction with the story as a good fiction, that "obliges" More. It is exactly because this reader positions *Utopia* between fact and fiction, and is not satisfied with either reading, that he is such a "clever person." Yet this person, clever as he may be, is an accidental good reader; he wants *Utopia* to be one or the other, either fact or fiction, a sincere rendering of an actual land or a satirical send-up of an imaginary place. "Now, when he questions whether Utopia is real or fictitious," More complains, "I find his finished judgment wanting." It is the "or" in the first clause that is the problem here. Written in the tradition of *serio ludere*, or "serious play" that More admired so much in classic authors, the story is both fact and fiction, sincere and satirical.³⁷ Utopia is someplace *and* no-place.³⁸

Utopia cannot be realized, because it is unrealistic. It is, after all, no place. Yet *Utopia's* presentation—not only its copious claims to facticity, but the realism of the descriptions—gives the reader a world to imagine; that is, it is also some-place.³⁹ It thus works as springboard for imagination. More is not telling us simply to think about a different social order (Hythloday, as you will remember, tries this in Book I, and fails) but instead conjures up a vision for us, drawing us into the alternative through characters, scenes, and settings in this phantasmagoric far-off land. We do not imagine an alternative abstractly, but inhabit it concretely, albeit vicariously. Upon their meeting, More (the character) begs Hythloday to describe in detail the wonderful world to which he has traveled, and asks him to "set out in order all things relating to their soil, their rivers, their towns, their people, their manners, constitution laws, and, in a word, all that you can imagine we desire to know." More (the author/artist) then complies with his own request. Through *Utopia* we are presented with a world wholly formed, like an architect's model or a designer's prototype. We experience a sense of radical alterity as we step inside of it and try it on for size. For the time of

the tale's telling, we live in Utopia, its landscape seeming familiar and its customs becoming normal. This reorients our perspective. More provides us with a vision of another, better world—and then destabilizes it.

This destabilization is the key. More imagines an alternative to his sixteenth-century Europe, which he then reveals to be a work of imagination. (It is, after all, no-place.) But the reader has been infected; another option has been shown.⁴⁰ They cannot safely return to the assurances of their own present, as the naturalness of their world has been disrupted. As the opening lines of a brief poem attached to the first printings of *Utopia* read:

Will thou know what wonders strange be,
 in the land that late was found?
 Will thou learn thy life to lead,
 by divers ways that godly be?

Once an alternative—“divers ways that godly be”—has been imagined, staying where one is or to trying something else become options that demand attention and decision.⁴¹

Yet the choice More offers is not an easy one. By disabling his own vision he keeps us from short-circuiting this imaginative moment into a fixed imaginary: a simple swapping of one image for another, one reality for another, the Emperor with clothes versus the Emperor without clothes. More will not let us accept (or reject) his vision of the ideal society as the final destination. In another poem attached to the early editions, this one printed in the Utopian language and in the voice of the island itself, “Utopia” explains:

I one of all other without philosophy
 Have shaped for many a philosophical city.

In other words, Utopia does not have, nor does it provide the reader, a wholly satisfactory philosophy; its systems of logic, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology are constantly undercut by More. But it is because the reader cannot satisfy themselves within the confines of Utopia that it can become “for many a philosophical city,” a place that many can ponder and a space that makes room for all to think.

The problem with asking people to imagine “outside the box” is that, unaided, they usually will not. We may bend and shape the box, reveal its walls and pound against them, but our imagination is constrained by the tyranny of the possible. Computer programs demonstrate these limitations well. A good program—be it word-processing software, a videogame, or a simple desktop layout—enables immense possibilities for action (you can even personalize your “preferences”), but all this action is circumscribed by the program’s code, and if you try to do something outside the given algorithms your action *will not compute*. Use the program long enough, and you will forget that there is an “outside.” With *Utopia*, however, More provides a peculiar structure, a box that refuses to contain anything for long, a program that repeatedly crashes, yet a structure that succeeds in providing an alternative platform from which to imagine.

The problem with many social imaginaries is that they posit themselves as a realizable possibility. Their authors imagine a future or an alternative and present it as *the* future or *the* alternative. If accepted as a genuine social possibility, this claim leads to a number of not mutually exclusive results:

1. Brutalizing the present to bring it into line with the imagined future—witness the Nazi genocide, Communist forced collectivization or, in this century, the apocalyptic terrorism of radical Islam.

2. Disenchantment as the future never arrives, and the alternative is never realized—for example, the descent and consequent depression of the New Left after 1968.
3. A vain search for a new imaginary when the promised one fails to appear—such as the failed promises of advertising that lead to an endless and ultimately unsatisfying cycle of consumption.
4. Living a lie—as in “The American Dream” or Stalin’s “Socialism achieved.”
5. Rejecting possibility altogether—dismissing Utopia, with a heartfelt conservative distrust or an ironic liberal wink, as a naïve impossibility.

But what if impossibility is incorporated into the social imaginary in the first place? For this is exactly what More does. By positioning his imaginary someplace as no-place, he escapes the problems that typically haunt political imaginaries.⁴² Yes, the alternatives he describes are sometimes absurd (gold and silver chamber pots? a place called no-place?), but this conscious absurdity is what keeps *Utopia* from being a singular and authoritative narrative—that is, a closed act of imagination to be either accepted or rejected.

In his second letter to Peter Giles, More mounts a defense of absurdity, writing that he cannot fathom how such a “clever person,” who has criticized *Utopia* for containing absurdities, can carry on “as if there were nothing absurd in the world, or as if any philosopher had ever ordered the state, or even his own house, without instituting something that had better be changed.” In this striking passage More links the absurd with a call for revision, seamlessly transitioning from a recognition that the world contains many absurdities to making the point that philosophers’ creations are never perfect. In the last clause he even suggests that all

philosophical plans and orders, whether public or private, are incomplete; they always contain things which ought to be altered. More is, no doubt, referring to his own *Utopia* here. In creating a philosophical order himself, then salting it with absurdities and ironies, More is making sure the reader will not accept the plan he has described as perfect, complete, or finished. Thus, he leaves the door open for reflection and criticism.

Think back to More's advice to Hythloday in Book I regarding social criticism. Instead of confronting people directly with one's alternative opinion, it is far more effective, More says, to "cast about" and employ an "indirect approach" that meets people where they are. To make this point, More draws from the stage a telling metaphor that implies a means of persuasion in which the audience is drawn into an alternative reality. But recall as well Hythloday's response: More's method is nothing more than a creative means "for lying." For all its limitations, the advantage of direct criticism is that its very negation sets in motion a constant questioning whereby any claims are subjected to rigorous interrogation. It is an open system of thought. But what sorts of checks are there on the phantasmagoric alternatives generated by the dramatic artist or social philosopher? An open *Utopia* is More's answer. By creating an alternative reality and simultaneously undermining it, he encourages the reader not be taken in by the fantasy. In other words, it is hard to fool someone with a lie if they already know it is one. The absurd fact, or the faulty fiction, that the "clever person" initially objected to is precisely what leaves Utopia open to being challenged and, more important, approached as "something that had better be changed."

This openness can be problematic. If an advantage of a Utopia open to criticism, participation, modification, and re-creation is that it never hardens into a fixed state that then closes down popular engagement,

the possible disadvantage is that such an open Utopia functions poorly as a political ideal. It could be argued that, in the process of continual destabilization, Utopia never attains the presence, imaginal or otherwise, necessary to function as a prompt for action. Utopia is therefore not a motivating vision of the promised land, but more like a hallucination in the desert: nothing we should walk toward or work for. To continue with Biblical analogies: Utopia is the Jewish Messiah who never arrives. But the value of the Jewish Messiah, as Walter Benjamin points out, is not that he or she never arrives, but that their arrival is *imminent*: “every second of time [is] the straight gate through which the Messiah might arrive.”⁴³ Similarly, Utopia gives us something to imagine, anticipate and prepare for. Utopia is not present, as that would preclude the work of popular imagination and action (“It has already arrived, so what more is there to do?”); nor, however, is it absent, since that would deny us the stimulus with which to imagine an alternative (“There is only what we have always known!”). Utopia is imminent possibility.

Utopia, however, occupies a different position. It is *present*. Utopia as an ideal may forever remain on the horizon, but More's *Utopia* is an ink-and-paper book that one can behold (and read) in the here and now. It is like the Messiah who arrives and announces their plan for the world. However, as was the case with the Christian Messiah, the presence embodied within More's material text exists only for a moment, its power, glory and permanence undermined by its inevitable destruction.* This curious state of being and not being, a place that is also no-place, is what gives *Utopia* its power to stimulate imagination,

* Alas, poor Jesus of Nazareth was unfortunate enough to be resurrected, stabilized, and institutionalized by the official church, thereby becoming a symbol of divine authority and sacrificing his subversive quality as an open text.

for between these poles an opening is created for the reader of *Utopia* to imagine, What if? for themselves.⁴⁴

“What if?” is *the* Utopian question. It is a question that functions both negatively and positively. The question throws us into an alternative future: *What if* there were only common property? But because we still inhabit the present, we also are forced to look back and ask: How come we have private property here and now? Utopia insists that we contrast its image with the realities of our own society, comparing one to the other, stimulating judgment and reflection. This is its critical moment.⁴⁵ But this critical reflection is not entirely negating. That is, it is not caught in the parasitical dependency of being wed to the very system it calls into question, for its interlocutor is not only a society that one wants to tear down, but also a vision of a world that one would like to build. (This is what distinguishes the “What if?” of Utopia from the same question posed by dystopias.) Utopian criticism functions not as an end in itself, but as a break with what is for a departure toward something new. By asking “What if?” we can simultaneously criticize *and* imagine, imagine *and* criticize, and thereby begin to escape the binary politics of impotent critique on the one hand and closed imagination on the other.

When teaching or speaking on *Utopia*, I often find that the ensuing discussion becomes a debate about the content of the book—that is, whether the characteristics of the alternative society described by More are something to be admired or condemned. There is certainly much to admire about More’s Utopia; the island nation’s communalism and its inhabitants’ consideration for one another, for example; or the rational planning of a society that provides labor, leisure, education, and health-care for all; or a system of justice that seems truly just, as well as a level of religious and intellectual tolerance that today, in our times, seems to be in retreat. And then, of course, there is the blissful lack of lawyers.

But there is also much to condemn about More's alternative society: the formal and casual patriarchy that leaves women subservient to men; the colonization of nearby lands and the Utopians' forced removal of those foreign populations deemed not properly productive; the society's system of slavery which, though relatively benign by sixteenth-century standards, still leaves some people the property of others. And while Utopia may be just as a society, Utopians, as individuals, have little freedom to determine their own lives. Finally, like so many Utopias, More's Utopia, with its virtuous customs and wholesome amusements seems, well, a bit boring.

Such a conversation about the characteristics of More's imaginary island has a certain value, but to get hung up on the details, as with the debate over whether the author is sincere or satirical, is to miss the greater point. The details of the society artfully sketched by More *do* matter, but only in so far as they provide a vivid place to which the reader might journey, and which they might vicariously inhabit for a time. As More tried to convince Hythloday back in Book I, dramatic immersion is a far more effective means of persuasion than combative criticism. But to defend or attack this or that law or custom of Utopia is to mistake the value of the text, for it is not the specific details conveyed in its content that are truly radical, but rather the transformative work the content does.⁴⁶ This is where More's (political) artistry is most effective.

Toward the end of his account of the fanciful Island, Raphael Hythloday, leader of the blind and speaker of nonsense, tells More (and us) that Utopia, because of the plans adopted and the structural foundations laid, is "like to be of great continuance." Indeed it will continue, for the very plan and structure of More's *Utopia* makes it a generative text—one that guarantees that imagination does not stop when the author has finished writing and the book is published. All texts are realized and continuously

re-realized by those who experience them, and in this way they are forever rewritten, but More went to special pains to ensure that his imaginative act would not be the last word.⁴⁷ Lest the reader find themselves too comfortable in this other world he has created, the author goes about unsettling his alternative society, building with one hand while disassembling with the other, fashioning a Utopia that must be engaged dialectically.

Utopia, moving metaphors from one medium to another, functions as source code, providing the core of what can, and must, be modified by the reader in order to create a functioning Utopian program (for on its own, it continually crashes).⁴⁸ In the final line of Book II, More, in character, concludes, “I cannot perfectly agree to everything [Hythloday] has related. However, there are many things in the commonwealth that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments.”⁴⁹ These are More’s final instructions to the reader: it is because there is no hope of *this* Utopia being realized that wishing for—and imagining—*another* Utopia is possible.⁵⁰ More is not only the author of an imaginative alternative; he is a facilitator of our own imagination. *Utopia* is not a plan, but neither is it a prank. It is a *prompt*.⁵¹

There is a famous passage in the Bible that those invested in political imagination like to cite. It is from *Proverbs* (29:18), and the King James Version begins like this: “Where there is no vision, the people perish . . .” Usually it is only this phrase that is remembered, but the full line continues thus: “. . . but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.”⁵² It is the passage in its entirety that reveals the double-edged sword of political imagination. The Utopic imagination is necessary: it gives the people something to believe in and hope for. Yet that moment of imagination will—and, for the authors and translators of the Bible, must—become law to be followed if a new world is to be built. In other words, what starts out as one person or a small group’s creative inspiration becomes everyone’s program to

follow, everyone's box to be contained within. This is the Utopian history from which we are desperately trying to awake: communism, fascism, and now neoliberalism. Each one starts out as imagination; each becomes law. It appears an inescapable trap.

But there is a way out: the vision, and the attendant law, must be one that can never be fixed or stabilized. This is what *Utopia* promises: imagined alternatives that insist on remaining imaginary: no-place. By envisioning impossibilities Utopia creates an opening to ask "What If?" without closing down this free space by seriously answering "This is what." With such visions, the future imagined can never be fixed. There will never be a moment when Utopia can be definitively declared. Instead, these alternative plans for our future exist, and exist only, as what the poet Wallace Stevens called a "supreme fiction": a fiction we know is a fiction yet inspires nonetheless.⁵³ These utopian visions are something we have imagined, and thus can re-imagine at will. Utopia is No-Place, and therefore it is left up to all of us to find it.

Postscripts

1. The conclusion above, while perhaps poetic, is politically unsatisfactory. It is one thing to talk about open readings of a fictional Utopia; it is quite another to provide real solutions to the dire political, social, economic, and ecological problems we face in the world today.⁵⁴ How can this “Open Utopia”—an ideal that cannot be stabilized, much less manifest—help us address and resolve pressing problems in the material world? The simple answer is that it cannot, and that is the point. As I have argued above, Utopia’s very refusal to be nailed down and made real is what powers it as an “imaginal machine”⁵⁵—a technology for freeing our thinking from the prison house of the possible and for imagining alternatives ourselves.

However, Utopias are not created and communicated no-place; they are dreamt of and disseminated some-place. And that someplace is inhabited by all sorts of people with all sorts of different skills. A strict division of labor may not exist in the mythical land that More describes in *Utopia*, but it is a fact in our real world. Engineers, programmers, and fabricators have long taken the impossible dreams of artists, visionaries, and revolutionaries and brought them down to earth, transforming them into something possible. Dreamers need builders to take their ideas and ideals and give them practical application, addressing real-world problems with material solutions. Builders need dreamers too, for if you start with the possible there is nothing to move toward, and nothing to compromise with. With both, we imagine *and* build a new world.

But dreamy Utopians need not wait around for practical builders to join them, nor vice versa, for within ourselves we occupy these

multiple subject positions ourselves. Perhaps Marx and Engels's communist ideal of the person who can "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening [and] criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" is a bit, well, Utopian, but most of us do imagine *and* execute multiple things many times every day.⁵⁶ This combination of imagining and then acting upon that imagination is, arguably, what makes us human. To quote Marx again: "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality."⁵⁷ Utopia is practical because humans will inevitably attempt to put it into practice.

2. This, however, is not where the utility of Utopia ends. More's *Utopia* is a methodology for planning as much, if not more, than it is a plan itself. As I have argued above, More proposes an *open* engagement with politics and planning, whereby both social relations and material structures are forever open to re-vision. It is not hard to see how the demand for openness might be applied to the planning process. The ideal of open participation and a process of continual re-vision are at the core of any truly democratic governance. But openness can apply equally well to product as to process, and the objects of creation themselves can be evaluated in terms of whether or not they are open to criticism, participation, modification, and re-creation.

For instance, all societies, no matter how rudimentary or grand, must have a means to generate and distribute energy. What would an open energy system look like? To begin with the negative: it would *not* look like most systems today, dependent as they are on

large-scale, capital-intensive investments like hydroelectric dams, massive carbon-fueled facilities, or nuclear power plants. (Not surprisingly, these were the favored projects of closed “Utopian” systems like the Soviet Union.) The very scale of and investment in such projects discourages fluidity and revision. Such a Utopia is complete, cast in concrete, and to change or modify it would be too costly and too difficult.

But consider an alternate model, hardly radical, that currently exists in many areas alongside these monstrous projects: decentralized and distributed energy. With Distributed Energy Resource (DER) systems, individuals, groups, and localities generate their own power with whatever means they see fit, use what they need, and then sell their excess energy back to the grid through a process called net metering. Because there is a diversity of suppliers, potentially utilizing a diversity of power-generating technologies, experimentation, flexibility, and constant regeneration are rewarded instead of retarded. The US state of Vermont, for instance, is currently promoting “cow power,” with dairy farms generating power from the methane gas that results from bovine waste. A “practical” solution like this may not be Utopian as we are used to thinking about the term—far from Lenin’s famous equation: socialism + electricity = communism—but it embodies the open spirit of *Utopia*. We Utopians can imagine more.

3. “We Utopians . . .” I write these words blithely, but where is the “we” in this process of Utopian imagination? *Utopia* is a book about society, but as a book it confronts the reader as an individual.⁵⁸ By posing the question of “What if?” to the individual reader, it could well be argued that *Utopia* engenders an individualized response. That is, if the function of *Utopia* is not to present an authoritative

vision but to prompt others to imagine an alternative themselves, then is the inevitable result not a multitude of idiosyncratic and likely incommensurate Utopias? This may be fine for a reading group, but how does one build a society like this? The advantage of the totalitarian Utopian visions is that they were singular, solid and authoritative: you either bought in or you did not; you either climbed aboard or you were rolled over. Brutal, yes, but also very effective in changing the world on a mass scale. If we are serious about a non-totalitarian Utopia we have to ask the question: Can Utopia be collectively imagined and be built as a collaborative political project?

This is a serious challenge, but the problem may not be insurmountable. The printed book provided the means for More to create the imaginal machine of *Utopia*, but it is the latest revolution in communications that suggests ways to turn individualized creativity into collective results. Open source software, upon which our digital age was founded and without which you would not be reading these words now, is one particularly successful model.⁵⁹ The rudiments of open source are this: computer programs are coded by an individual, then opened up (made visible and accessible) to other programmers to modify, adapt, and utilize, and then distribute and share again. Without individual imagination there would be no source code, nor modifications; yet the result is a collaborative effort that results in a functional product. For another highly successful model of collaborative creation, we can return to my earlier example of Wikipedia. Each of the millions of articles presented in Wikipedia is composed from the creative input of a number of contributors, each creating their own definition of the truth and reconciling it with others. As I have argued, the “truth” that results from this process

is of a different sort than that contained on the pages of a print-era encyclopedia: it is openly contentious, frequently changing, and sometimes in error. Nonetheless, out of this collective conversation comes an eminently usable set of definitions.

There is much to criticize about both these examples. The majority of work on open source projects comes from a minority of creators, just as a majority of open source projects are never used while a minority are readily adapted (in what is called a “power law distribution”). Likewise, Wikipedia has been attacked for opaque practices that allow some participants more power to contribute and edit than others. Both these criticisms need to be taken into account before making “Utopian” claims about the applicability of such examples. But there is an even bigger problem, one specific to Utopian imagination: both open source software and Wikipedia entries work within generally accepted definitions of success. A computer program either works or it does not, and on this functionality we can generally agree; and while Wikipedia may be challenging the dominance of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, its contributors also draw upon the traditional, and largely consensual, definition of how a good encyclopedia entry reads. But Utopia is a project at whose core lies radical *redefinition*. Utopia breaks the mold on “normal” practices of organizing society, and thus there is no consensus on what a “good” Utopia will look like or on how to determine when we have actually imagined or created one.

But the beauty of digital projects, especially those that depend upon networks of contributors, is that they are never complete: there is always another iteration or another version to be created and released. The book form constrained More’s *Utopia*—even the most imaginative exchange was limited by the singularity of the text and

the isolation of the reader. (Alas, a limitation of the book you hold in your hands as well.) But digital platforms—like theopenutopia.org—open up this exchange by networking multiple readers and providing the means with which every reader can also be a writer. Thus, a truly open *Utopia* can become the source code for Utopia collectively imagined, and re-imagined. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 . . . many Utopias.

4. To be written by the reader . . .

Notes

- 1 In 1936, Stalin declared that socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union. “Actually existing socialism” was later used as an expedient term to describe the Soviet economic and political system and differentiate it from the ideals of communism and the realities of capitalism.
- 2 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989). Even for a defender of neoliberalism like Fukuyama, its triumph is bittersweet. He writes:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.
- 3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, London and New York: Verso, 1998, p. 66.
- 4 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Oxford: OUP, 2009.
- 5 “In the best Hegelian tradition, the human being as such was understood by Soviet ideology as pure potentiality, a fluid nothing that becomes something only if it is given a certain function, a certain role in the process of socialist life-building.” Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, London and New York: Verso, 2011, p. 122.
- 6 Or articulated in reverse: “The country of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith,” writes Paul Ricoeur, whose distinction between interpretation as recollection of meaning and interpretation as an exercise of suspicion describes this distinction between illusion (with its “restoration of meaning”) and criticism (and its “method of demystification”) fruitfully. For Ricoeur, however,

each side, practiced at its best, complements the other: the demystification practiced by the critic clears the way for restoration, while illusion, arrived at through interpretation, is a post-critical, rational faith: “a second naïveté.” Alas, neither illusion nor criticism is usually practiced at its best. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 26, 28, 32.

- 7 Jacques Rancière makes a useful distinction between “politics,” where what constitutes social reality is contested, and “policing,” in which these definitions, now fixed, are enforced. See *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- 8 The Bible, King James Version, *John* 8:31–33.
- 9 See the first chapter of my book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy*, New York: New Press, 1997.
- 10 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- 11 Web statistics at thefuturebuzz.com and gigatweeter.com. These numbers increase daily.
- 12 Wikipedia statistics at wikipedia.org.
- 13 Rasmussen Reports, “Just 53% Say Capitalism Better Than Socialism,” Thursday, April 9, 2009, at rasmussenreports.com.
- 14 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “‘Socialism’ Not So Negative, ‘Capitalism’ Not So Positive,” May 4, 2010, at people-press.org.
- 15 James Robbins, “Free Market Flawed, Says Survey,” BBC News Special Reports, November 9, 2009.
- 16 What the critic L.M. Bogard wittily calls a “hegemonologue.” “A Place for Protest: The Billionaires for Bush Interrupt the Hegemonologue,” in Leslie Hill and Helen Paris, eds, *Performance and Place*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

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- 17 “President Bush Discounts Impact of Anti-War Protest Marches around the World,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, February 18, 2003, transcript at npr.org.
- 18 Robert Graves and Didier Madoc-Jones, “London Futures,” show at the Museum of London, October 2010–March 2011, at postcardsfromthefuture.co.uk.
- 19 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken, 1968, p. 242.
- 20 Thanks to Marguerite Day for introducing me to the wonderfully evocative term “disasterbation.”
- 21 Sam Green, *Utopia in Four Movements*, performed at The Kitchen, New York City, October 8, 2010.
- 22 My use of “open” draws, in equal parts, upon Umberto Eco’s idea of the “open work”—artwork whose meaning is only completed in interaction with the spectator—and “open” as it is used in the “open source” software movement to describe a condition in which source code is open to other programmers to build upon. See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, and Eric S. Raymond, “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” at catb.org.
- 23 See, for example, J. H. Hexter, *More’s Utopia: The Biography of an Idea*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952, esp. pp. 11–30.
- 24 Hexter, *More’s Utopia*, pp. 103–15.
- 25 Thomas More, *Utopia*, revised edition, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, Cambridge: CUP, 2002, p. 35, n. 81.
- 26 As the art critic Ernst Fischer writes, “whether art soothes or awakens, casts shadows or brings light, it is never merely a clinical description of reality. Its function is always to move the *whole* man. To enable the ‘I’ to identify itself with another’s life, to make its own what is not and yet is capable of being.” Fisher continues, “Even a great didactic artist like Brecht does not act purely

through reason and argument, but also through feeling and suggestion. He not only confronts the audience with a work of art, he also lets them ‘get inside’ it.” *The Necessity of Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2010, p. 23.

27 “Indirect approach” is the translation in Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, eds, *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, IV, “Utopia,” New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 99; and in *Utopia* (Logan and Adams), p. 35.

28 Hexter, *More’s Utopia*, p. 66.

29 A more poetic translation is Ogden’s:

Every house has a door to the street and another to the garden. The doors, which are made with two leaves, open easily and swing shut of their own accord, freely letting anyone in (for there is no private property).

Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. H. V. S. Ogden, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949, p. 31.

30 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, with assistance from Hallie Franks. Another etymological enigma pointed out by Franks: the Latinization *daios*—as in *Hythlodæus*—in its Greek form is a common addition to Greek names. But it is also used independently by Homer to mean “destructive,” and by Plutarch and Epicurus to imply knowing or cunning. Attached to *Huthlos*, this suggests that *Hythloday* is a knowing, and thus cunningly destructive, fool. See also *Utopia* (Logan and Adams), p. 5, n. 9.

31 The sincerity of More is the general assumption of the canonical *Utopia* scholars Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, who together edited the standard modern translation of *Utopia* in *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*. In his own book, *More’s Utopia*, Hexter acknowledges More’s sense of humor but still demands a singular, and sincere, reading of *Utopia*: “The one point of unanimous agreement about *Utopia* is that it is a work of social comment; and while ambiguity may enhance the value of certain special kinds of poetry, it does not enhance the value of social comment” (p. 11). I would argue quite

the opposite: it is exactly the ambiguity that *creates* the value of social comment. Edward Surtz, in the Introduction to his classic (and Catholic) edition of *Utopia* (New Haven: Yale, 1964) also makes the case for the general sincerity of More's vision: "The hope for far better things, sustained by the view (so typically Renaissance) that man may shape and mold himself in any chosen form, is embodied in an apocalyptic vision of the best state possible—Utopia" (p. viii). The sincere More is also generally promoted by the new standard-bearers, Logan and Adams.

The revisionist, satirical position is argued most forcefully by Alistair Fox in his *Utopia: An Elusive Vision* (New York: Twayne/Macmillan, 1993). Fox claims that, in writing *Utopia*, "More experienced a loss of faith in his utopian vision" (p. 32), and ended up making an argument against any such feasibility of the idea of Utopia, while poking fun at the very idea of human perfectibility. Some of his assertions are a bit far-fetched, but Fox understands that what is being presented is more complicated than a simple assertion and defense of an ideal society. Fox's mistake is to believe that it has to be either sincere or satirical, for or against. Ultimately I agree with Fox's frame—the ambiguous text—but not with his assessment that More had lost faith in his utopian project. Quite the opposite: the tension between belief and disbelief allows a place for readers to complete the political project.

- 32 This reasoning—that Utopia is a representation of an ideal Christian community—is in line with that of the seminal, and Catholic, *Utopia* scholar, Edward Surtz. See Introduction to his edition of *Utopia*.
- 33 *Utopia* (Logan and Adams), p. 43, n. 6.
- 34 Niccolò Machiavelli's guidebook to power, *The Prince*, was written about the same time as *Utopia*, in 1513, though it was not published until 1532.
- 35 A similar joke about the impossibility of Hythloday contradicting More is made by Guillaume Budé in his letter to Thomas Lupset, included in this volume.
- 36 The philosopher Louis Marin, drawing upon Kant and Husserl, calls this the "neutral" position of Utopia. "It enters between yes and no: there is an

unoccupiable ‘place’ that the neutral occupies.” Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, transl. Robert A. Vollrath, Amherst, NY: Humanities Books, 1984, p. 19. For better and worse, I only came across Marin’s provocative and parallel analysis of *Utopia* after my own investigation was largely complete.

- 37 In the preface to his translations of Lucian, More writes that this—*serio ludere*—type of writing “satisfies the Horatian injunction that literature should combine delight with instruction.” In his second letter to Giles, More explains that this is why he wrote *Utopia* the way he did. But, as Logan and Adams point out,

More was also attracted to the tradition of *serio ludere* for another, deeper, reason. The divided, complex mind, capable of seeing more than one side of a question and reluctant to make a definite commitment to any single position, has a proclivity for ironic discourse; and *serio ludere*—in which the play can serve to qualify or undercut any statement—is one of the great vehicles of irony.

Utopia (Logan and Adams), p. xxvi.

- 38 In the appendix to *The Coming Community*, philosopher Giorgio Agamben discusses the importance of a positionality between “that something is” (being) and “that something is not” (nothingness) that he calls “rather,” or the power to not not-be. This position of “rather” is not one of acceptance of what is, or what is not, but *rather* that of agency. (Agamben points out that “rather” is related to the Old English *rathe*, meaning “quick” or “eager,” and that the Latin form is *potius*, from *potus*, “that which is able.”) It is exactly the *not not-being* status of *Utopia*, situated between no-place and some-place, that prompts the reader to imagine something other. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, transl. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 104; cf. p.36. Thanks to Tamas Debozy for bringing this passage to my attention.
- 39 Fox describes this as “fictive realism.” *Utopia*, p. 11.
- 40 Such a decision, as Leo Tolstoy put it, is

like the question which presents itself to a traveler when the road, on which he or she has been journeying, divides into two branches. He must go on and cannot say: “I will not think about it, but will go on just as I did before.” There was one road, now there are two, and one must make a choice.

Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, transl. Constance Garnett, London: William Heinemann, 1894, p. 5.

- 41 Edward Surtz expresses this complicated relationship between contemplation of a “nonexistent ideal” and its effect upon us particularly well when he writes:

Hence the curious ambivalence of detachment and involvement on our part. The perfect state, expressing in its details and in the ensemble a nonexistent ideal, is a work of art which detaches us from actuality and from self in sheer contemplation of beauty and goodness. Insofar as our own experiences, however, are reflected in the new creation, the *Utopia* implicates our feelings and consciences and gently forces our renewed commitment to justice, equity, and charity.

Utopia (Surtz), p. viii.

- 42 As Terry Eagleton writes, “If we need images of our desire, we also need to prevent these images from mesmerizing us and so standing in the way of it.” “Utopia and its Opposites,” in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds, *Socialist Register 2000: Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999, p. 34.
- 43 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, p. 264.
- 44 Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, responsible for culture and education, criticized the early Soviet avant-garde for the impracticality of their designs for the future, stating, “They play at

being engineers . . .” As Susan Buck-Morss points out, this misses the point: these artists’ imaginings had “cognitive power” partly *because* they remained imaginary: “The imagination of such designs interrupted existing time and space as a non-functional, utopian presence *in* the present. By not closing the gap between dream and reality, the artworks of the avant-garde left both dream and reality to criticize one another.” Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 64–5.

- 45 Darko Suvin, writing about science fiction, describes a “literature of cognitive estrangement,” marked by “the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternate to the author’s empirical environment.” This description applies to More’s *Utopia* as well. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 4, 7–9.
- 46 As Louis Marin writes in his *Utopics*, “The contents of its message is not the transmission of the message but the code for transmission.” Marin later calls this a “producing product.” Marin, *Utopics* pp. 9–10, 11.
- 47 Tatiana Venediktova of Moscow State University opened my eyes to this open, Utopian function of *all* literature.
- 48 Fredric Jameson, writing on the form of More’s *Utopia*, comments upon the do-it-yourself ethos encouraged in the reader, arguing that it is “precisely this dimension of a hobby-like activity, which anyone can do in their spare time, at home, in your garage or workshop, that organizes the readership of the Utopian text, a better mousetrap which you can also emulate, thinking of new twists on existing laws and customs and coming up with ingenious models on your own.” Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, p. 35.
- 49 Other translations make even clearer the distinction, and relationship, between what is expected and what one wishes for. For Surtz, “there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to

wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized” (p. 246); and for Logan and Adams, “in the Utopian commonwealth there are many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see” (p. 107).

- 50 Sigmund Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” theorizes that the degradation of the loved (and lost) object by the grieving subject is necessary in order to release the subject to live and love again. As Richard Sennett recently pointed out to me, the same might be argued of *Utopia*: that it must fail, and that failure must be experienced, in order to free the reader to imagine another Utopia. *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974, pp. 243–58.
- 51 *Utopia* is truly a “conversation piece” as the term is used by the artist-designer Julian Bleecker in *Design Fiction*. In this extended essay Bleecker makes the case for understanding speculative fiction (particularly science fiction) as an integral part of the design process, and argues for the importance of “design provocations”—that is, “objects meant to produce new ways of thinking about the near future, optimistic futures, and critical interrogative perspectives.” *Utopia* is just such a provocation. *Design Fiction*, Near Futures Laboratory, March 2009, at nearfuturelaboratory.com, pp. 6, 7.
- 52 The Bible, King James Version, *Proverbs* 29:18.
- 53 I am indebted to Simon Critchley for drawing my attention to the Utopian ramifications of Stevens’s “supreme fiction.”
- 54 Here I find common cause with Erik Olin Wright when he writes, “What we need, then, is ‘real utopias’: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible way-stations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.” And yet, as Wright also points out, “what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions.” *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London and New York: Verso, 2010. p. 4.

- 55 Stephen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*, London/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2009, p. 12.
- 56 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur, New York: International Publishers, 1988, p. 52.
- 57 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, transl. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), p. 174.
- 58 Poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his classic essay “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” comments upon this closed nature of the book:

Structurally, the printed book is a medium that operates as a monologue, isolating producer and reader. Feedback and interaction are extremely limited, demand elaborate procedures, and only in the rarest of cases lead to corrections. Once an edition has been printed it cannot be corrected; at best it can be pulped. The control circuit in the case of literary criticism is extremely cumbersome and elitist. It excludes the public on principle.

Electronic media, however, even in the early 1970s form that Enzensberger was familiar with, held out the promise of a different social relationship, one where the lines between producer and consumer merge as, he believed, “the structure demands interaction.” Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Critical Essays*, German Library, vol. 98 (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 71–2.

- 59 See Steven Levy’s *Hackers* (New York: Dell, 1984) for the importance of open-source software in the early development of computing and networks. For the social potential of digital communications, see Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, and Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, New York: Penguin, 2008.