

## Utopia – a constant interrogation project

Valentina ROBU<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*The article revisits Thomas More's Utopia in an attempt to highlight the fundamental link between reason and the imaginary. This link underlines the consistent definition of any utopian constructs, in fact. Utopias are ambitious, rational projects, centred on the essential aspirations of ancient and modern historical ages and share characteristic elements. This paper follows the interplay of reason and the imaginary revealed in the most important work of Thomas More, a man of genius who lived on the narrow edge dividing Western Europe in two worlds on the eve of the Reformation. The article focuses on the analysis of the main aspects which define his utopia and will explore both the rational utopian project and its symbolic articulations against a literary background.*

*Keywords: utopia, reason, imaginary, utopian symbolism and imagery*

### 1. Introduction

#### *Method*

This article explores the characteristics of literary utopia from the perspective of the famous, often-cited *Utopia* written by Thomas More and published in Latin in 1516, in Louvain. Thomas More is credited with introducing utopia as a pattern of thought, a reference point for both past and subsequent works dealing with the subject. The imprint that he made in the world of literary ideas comes as a triplet, that in the eyes of the posterity generated identity for his own work and the books to come on this topic: the coinage of the term, the literary genre and the conceptual framework characteristic of utopias.

The paper looks at Utopia mainly from a literary perspective, with a focus on inaugural, founding images, adopting a phenomenological approach of the theme. Several definitions will be reviewed and a set of characteristics will serve as a reference for further discussion of the work. The social and economic aspects of the book will also be explored against a brief survey of utopian literature, but it is not the aim of the article to discuss the validity of the potential "ideology" behind the social structure

---

<sup>1</sup> Valentina Robu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, valentine.robust@rei.ase.ro

revealed by More's Utopia. "Ideology" is, anyway, a term that was awkwardly attached in retrospect to his work.

The trend of thought named utopianism is a vast collection of theories and analyses embracing the defining aspects of literary utopias as well as utopian systems. Recent attempts to define utopia demonstrate the complexity of this type of imaginary project as it has evolved. Naturally, all definitions are retrospective, as they are inextricably linked to the modern framework of analysis.

In this paper the social aspects and any relevant economic elements will be discussed inside the framework of the literary imagery, not as separate entities. The symbolic background will provide the ties between different chapters in the book devoted to a detailed description of the Utopian way of life.

Most of the comments on Utopia's imagery adopted here originate in the phenomenological approach described by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960). In his view, the phenomenological perspective unravels the inner mechanism of imagination by addressing the fundamental role of the poetic image. The productivity of imagination relies on the force of the poetic image: "L'exigence phénoménologique à l'égard des images poétiques est d'ailleurs simple: elle revient à mettre l'accent sur leur vertu d'origine, à saisir l'être même de leur originalité et à bénéficier ainsi de l'insigne productivité psychique qui est celle de l'imagination" (1960: 9). Thus, the potential of the poetic image of becoming a psychic origin in itself is the foundation of the process of reverie. The poetic image may thus be the germ of an entire world, the germ of an imagined universe. Moreover, in its newness, the poetic image opens a whole future to language ("un avenir du langage").

Original images and motives such as *the island*, *the messenger* from a different world, *the mirror* (mirroring worlds) or *the city* with its elaborate structure are pieces of the literary scaffolding on which Thomas More built the social construct of a new world. These images and their symbolic presence are very powerful because they manage to create the fictional environment of what is otherwise a construct of rational thinking; Utopia is an imagined world, even if vividly populated with social, political ideas and concepts, and social organization hypotheses. This article is an attempt to approach some of these ideas through the means of *creative imagination* that makes possible the absorption of the real world by the imaginary world ("... le monde réel est absorbé par le monde imaginaire", Bachelard, 1960: 12).

## 2. Brief biographical background

The name *Utopia* was coined by More from the Greek *ou-topos* (“no place”), and a pun on *eu-topos* (“good/pleasant place”) suggests More’s immense wit in outlining his double vision of the human situation: the bitter present and the aspiration for a better future. His wit, his ambivalent attitude to political involvement along with other inconsistencies in his social life are also responsible for what modern research is inclined to emphasize as the *paradoxical* nature of the writer himself as well as his major work (Greene, 1967).

Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in Latin and published it in 1516 in Louvain. He was at the time one of the most distinguished scholars in Europe, whose reputation as well as character and personal traits had won him the friendship of another iconic figure of European humanism, Erasmus. His classical education started in London and was focused on the Latin legacy; then he went to Oxford where he became a good Latinist as well as a scholar in Greek studies and at sixteen started his training in the legal profession. While a very successful lawyer he gave lectures on classical topics among which Augustine’s *City of God*. His rewarding legal career did not seem to interfere with his immense interest in the humanistic culture of his epoch and won him in 1529 the much-envied position of Lord Chancellor. He thus became the first layman to hold that office.

His friendship with Erasmus started in 1499 when the reputed leader of humanism visited England. We owe Erasmus a lot of references about More’s life, including detailed accounts of his family about which he used to say that it was like the academy of Plato. To Erasmus, More remained “the most delightful character in the world” and a man “born and made for friendship” (Greene: 12). In time, Thomas More became increasingly involved in the political life of England, an aspect that several commentators of his life find paradoxical, especially when analysing his views on politics.

A journey to the Netherlands in 1515 as a special envoy of King Henry VIII, whose counsellor he was, offered the opportunity to write most of his *Utopia*, which he published the following year. Apart from *Utopia*, his literary fame rests on *The History of King Richard III* and *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, but he was a prolific writer, important works in Latin and English continuing to emerge until his imprisonment in 1534. His translation work is impressive as well. His translation into English in 1510

of the *Lyfe of Johan Picus, Erle of Myrandula, a Greate Lorde of Italy* is considered “a treasury of ideals if not of facts” (Sampson and Churchill, 1970: 99).

Writers on his life generally agree that More had no illusions about his royal master. He met his confinement to the Tower with serenity following increasing pressure from Henry VIII that he should agree to his supremacy over the English Church. The refusal to the king’s demand for total conformity in this matter brought Thomas More his death in July 1535. He went to his death jesting with his executioner but his last recorded words were said in earnest gravity: “I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first”.

### 3. Utopia as a genre: definitions, views and general framework

As I said before, recent research explores the multiple perspectives that More’s *little book* opened into the vast area of European culture and the year 1516 represents a distinct moment of birth for modern narrative utopia: “the work of the English Christian humanist Thomas More, ... at once introduces a new word, literary institution and conceptual problematic into the European cultural imagination” (Wegner, 2002: xxi). Moreover, Utopia is an early example of “internationalism of scholarship, for it was written by the Englishman More in the universal Latin, it received additions from the Flemish Peter Giles, it was revised by the Dutch Erasmus, it was first printed (1516) at Louvain, then at Paris, and then later at Basle, where it was illustrated by two woodcuts from the hand of the German Holbein” (Sampson and Churchill, 1970: 99).

Writers on utopia brought to light various characteristics of utopian works. Thus, a definition by Sargent (2010: 6) states that utopia focuses around “*a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time or space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time or space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived*”.

This more or less technical definition is derived from Thomas More’s Utopia and recent research focuses on both More’s book and later works featuring city-states in which institutions and political systems are entirely governed by reason. The order and dignity of such places provided

a notable contrast with the unreasonable social and political systems of Christian Europe, driven by self-interest and greed for power and riches, and More illustrated such a system in Book I, written in England in 1516.

Other definitions consider similarities between utopian literature and other fictional genres. "Before being anything else, such as prophecy or guide to action, utopia is a metaphorical image, a verbal gesture, and a literary genre with procedures and parameters proper to it as such. One cannot properly explore its signification by considering its texts simply as a transparency transmitting ideas: what it says (how it signifies) has to be understood as well as what it signifies" (Suvin, 1988: 33-34). In this case, the author has associated utopia as a genre with a metaphorical consistency that brings it closer to SF literature. This is not the perspective adopted in this paper, although there is always the implication that a writer can suggest a world of meaning under the disguise of a metaphor. However, in the discussion of Thomas More's *Utopia*, this article has retained from such an approach the focus on literary means, the typical imagery of utopias, rather than the emphasis on action or the urge to change existing systems, which are so obvious in similar research.

A very comprehensive description of utopia as an imaginary exercise, written in both poetic and philosophical terms emerges in the book *The Critical Function of Faith* by André Scrima. At the heart of utopia, he says, stands the combination of the real and the imaginary. The imaginary is a function of the spirit and expresses itself through symbols; it is instrumental in such writings because it "operates a significant fracture from the surrounding reality and facilitates the settlement into the *nowhere* of utopia" (Scrima, 2011: 286). A very important idea is that this underlying fracture is in most cases linked to a *crisis* that may have an objective or a significant personal cause. Whatever the nature of the cause, utopia is linked to the end of a historical cycle, the end of a phase in civilization, generally speaking (2011: 287). I believe this feature sheds an interesting light on More's insight when he placed his book on the rift between his own world and a better world he designed in such consistent detail. The world he lived in was beginning to change dramatically: the power of the human intellect, the creative force of the Renaissance thought brought about utopian rational constructs of the type he designed. With his immense intelligence and perceptiveness More realized that social rapport based on violence and greed must be replaced by relationships resting on rational behaviour and virtues. The protestant Reformation was an

additional sign of a great civilizational rupture and More witnessed in England the will of a dominant king who was to become head of the church, just as he had witnessed Luther's radical doctrine which quickly spread throughout Western Europe and brought a rift in the heart of civilization itself.

The next section discusses three basic symbolic representations in More's book that were used to give contour to his imagined world and were instrumental in placing his consistent discourse on Utopia in a central area of universal literature.

#### **4. Major themes and imagery**

##### ***4.1 The island and the voyager/messenger***

The *literary utopia*, by contrast to utopian practice and utopian social theory, is a genre of the imaginary voyage. Voyages into unknown lands were a common literary device used long before Thomas More and have continued to be used throughout the centuries in literary works of great prestige.

In Greek and Roman bucolic poetry and in the literature of the Renaissance, life on a distant island is represented as a paradise (Arcadian life, for instance). In the English literature, a medieval text known as *The Land of Cokaygne*, an anonymous 13th-century poem, portrays a place that is allegedly better than paradise. Early Renaissance works amplified several literary motives in the classical literature of Greece and Rome because they offered the perfect background for staging plots and unraveling mysteries. And almost a century later from Utopia's first issue, in late Renaissance, Shakespeare's *Tempest* provided one of the most fascinating stories of life and destiny, originating in events that happen on an island. The choice for locating stories on isolated islands is almost a tradition in great English literature: Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift are only two well-known examples of writers who created memorable visions of distant islands. Therefore, the island has remained a privileged realm for imaginary constructs throughout the centuries.

Utopia is a round island, the geometric shape that represents it best is the circle, the symbol of perfection as well as reason. It is not completely isolated from the mainland as it preserved two stretches of land that still binds it to the mainland, reminding travellers of its origins. Isolation is

important for preserving customs and preventing contamination from corrupted social systems. More opens the Second Book with Raphael's account of how Utopia became an island. The creation of the island was a voluntary, deliberate and therefore a *reason*-dictated act following king Utopus' conquest of this land ("... he immediately commanded the removal of the fifteen-mile section of land joining the island to the continent" (More: 35). On a larger scale, in a way similar to the city, the island performs the function of integrating the human personality in a non-place (*u-topos*) governed by reason, order and a feeling of perpetual celebration.

The guide and the narrator of Utopia, the intriguing character whom More credits in the book as the author of hugely innovative ideas is Raphael Hythloday, a seaman at first sight. He becomes increasingly convincing during the dialogue preceding his narration of the Utopian world, having sailed "as a Ulysses, or better yet as a Plato" (Book One). The stage of their meeting is Antwerp, the real place where More had been sent on a diplomatic journey: "Since the invincible Henry VIII of England, a king adorned with all the princely virtues, had recently been involved in a serious controversy with His Most Serene Highness, Charles V of Spain, he sent me to Flanders to negotiate a settlement". These opening lines carry out the function of introducing the real world, of expressing the reality that is being slowly absorbed by the imaginary world in the Second Book. The passage from one world to another is then ensured by Hythloday, the narrator-messenger.

A systematic philosopher, he dedicated himself to the study of Greek and the Greek authors and is not very concerned with Latin writers except for Cicero and Seneca. His native land is Portugal and because he wanted to explore unknown regions, he joined Americus Vesputius in three of his travels (we are presented here with real-life elements of the narrative). During the last trip he decided to remain in one of the distant regions barely explored at the time and we are left to believe that, after wandering to unknown regions, he came across the land of Utopia, where he spent five years. Hythloday is therefore a messenger from Utopia's ideal world to *civilised* Europe but the reverse move is also functional.

His name brings additional colour to the general impression that the book creates and is characteristic of the paradoxical nature of both Utopia and More's view of life, a view suspended between a jocular attitude and a grave scrutiny of social evil. Raphael is the Angel of God, the healing angel

and the trustworthy guide of Tobias in the Old Testament's *Book of Tobit*. But in Greek Hythlodæus means *purveyor of nonsense*. The fictional nature of his name thus increases the inner tension of his narrative and generates questions meant to assess More's own attitude to his book.

Hythlodæus's role as a messenger is further emphasized by his knowledge of both worlds. He is acquainted with Britain and we find this out from the first pages of Book One, where he approaches a variety of aspects which were characteristic of the English way of life and attitude to governing. One such instance will be recalled here as it is too well-known to be left aside. At the end of a discussion on the futility of war he introduced the famous theme of the disaster brought about by sheep raising. "Once they were gentle and ate little, but now I hear that they have become so greedy and wild that they are devouring the human population. They devastate and depopulate fields, homes and entire towns" (More, 36). This and the following fragments anticipate social theories on population changes that are also to be found in Defoe, Dickens, Hardy and many other authors writing on poverty and social change.

Hythlodæus goes on to say that in their desire to acquire more pastures, the nobility, the gentry forced tenants off their land by fraud or violence. People had to leave their homes and were left with no other choice but stealing in order to survive. The lens through which More looks at these practices seem to have the same clarity and rigour as the work of Adam Smith in describing economic mechanisms two hundred years later. Hythlodæus then moves on to discussing the growing price of grain, the increase in unemployment, the kings' behaviour to their subjects, the rich men's practices: "There's large number of nobles who, like drones, live idly on the labours of others and who shave their tenants down to the very skin by increasing their rents" (p. 35). While most of the aspects described are directed to Europe in general (see, for instance, the attitude of the French during wars), some of them target England specifically: "Thus, the selfishness of a few will endanger your island ..." (p. 37).

A different world is then uncovered when the same messenger describes ruling practices in distant places. Thus, in the kingdom of the Macarians (the name originates in the word for *happiness* in Greek), a race living not far from Utopia, the king has to solemnly swear that he will never have more than a thousand pounds of gold in his treasury, or its equivalent in silver (p. 47). This is more than common practice, it has become a law put into practice by a king who *was more concerned with the*



*prosperity of his country than with his own wealth.* Moreover, the amount would be sufficient to suppress a rebellion or an invasion from another country, but not enough to encourage the invasion of other territories. Hythloday comments that “this was the chief reason for the law” (p. 48).

More created this character with the background of a philosopher because he wanted Hythloday to be much more than a narrator. The role of the messenger is given further weight when he describes practices but explains reasons as well, when he asserts and offers motivation, when he claims things and sometimes simply suggests things or implies something.

Raphael’s messenger status is also highlighted by the fact that he taught the natives Greek and helped them to become acquainted with Greek authors. When he decided to reside in Utopia, in his fourth voyage he brought “a bundle of books” including Plato’s and Aristotle’s works. Plutarch, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles and Herodotus, together with works of Hippocrates and Galen completed the list of authors the Utopians assimilated with their “natural genius”. As Greek seemed to be related to their own language it helped the natives to remain in the pursuit of knowledge. I believe More expresses here his ideal for classical education that, in his view, was the only means an educated society was meant to progress. While not explicitly developed in Utopia, the spiritual power of classical languages, used by the Holy Fathers of the Church, is acknowledged by More in a letter addressed to the Oxford University in 1518, in which he warned the governors against the frivolity and ridicule to which Greek and Roman studies were exposed.

#### *4.2 The mirrored/parallel worlds*

The mirrored book motive brings forward the contemporary image and the ideal image, in this case, contemporary England versus Utopia as described by Raphael Hythloday, the narrator. Attitudes toward work, money, social customs, land ownership, poverty and justice regulations are presented in detail in the two Books of Utopia, in what looks like an undisguised parallel between the social and political structure of 16<sup>th</sup>-century England ruled by King Henry VIII and an ideal society.

Research on utopia, such as Suvin’s (1988: 33), points to the inner mechanism of this type of fiction which is highlighted by “an explicit or implicit comparison of its imagined community with the author’s environment, by example or demonstration”. From this perspective, “every

utopia is an implicit satire of the author's empirical environment. More, Morris or Wells are always aiming at England and the European civilization" (1988: 34). Therefore, England and Utopia are the two contrasting sides pulsing vigorously in More's book, which most probably, the author intended as a satire directed at his contemporaries' views of state organization and social customs. The literary device of contrasting a decayed and corrupted England to a land where relationships stand on order, reason and virtue will be later used by Jonathan Swift in his celebrated novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The last part of this book, the original title of which is *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, is an example of what has been called *dystopia* (from Greek *dys-topos*: ill/evil/bad place) and is one of the most bitter and controversial satires in the English literature.

Historians of the English literature such as Sampson and Churchill do not hesitate to signal that the focus in More's book is on contemporary England, captured inside a comparison between the real and the imaginary world: "... the longest and the most valuable part of the book is not Utopia, but England. In other words, the book (like all its later progeny from Swift's *Gulliver* to Butler's *Erewhon* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) is mainly a picture of its own time – a criticism of the present rather than a construction of the future" (1970: 99).

I believe Utopia *is*, to a certain extent, a projection of its author's aspirations and ideas but its unique fictional structure and the ironical eloquence of Thomas More soften the radical nature of its views, which is not the case with later utopian writers and system reformers. We find this beautiful phrasing in a section devoted to wars and alliances: "... *that new world* whose geographic location is as far removed from us as are its customs" (p. 81). In this respect, I find it closer to Shakespeare's *Tempest* (c. 1611) where the loveliness of the story and the melancholy attached to the sunset of a remarkable destiny obscure the violence of the real world and of earlier Shakespearean plays as well.

This dual representation of worlds is used by More in most of the social aspects discussed in Utopia. Since greed and the desire of rich men to accumulate wealth have been already mentioned in earlier sections of the article, I have chosen here what appears to be the most scandalous of the ideas in More's book, Hythloday's account of the Utopian attitude to possession of goods.

The absence of private property is not an original idea, its career in the world of thought having been substantiated by Plato in the *Republic*. But it is central to the mental design of Utopia, and is the foundation for most of the other social, pragmatic theories in More's work. It reflects a type of relationships which is excluded from the utopian project: trade is thus excluded, and in a way, even family is moved to the periphery of social practice. Hythloday calls it a *sacred institution* of Utopia (More, 50). In his account of how private ownership of goods is settled there is constant reference to contemporary society, therefore the discord between the two worlds appears in a clear manner: "*With the aid of only a few laws, they (the Utopians) have organized things so well that virtue has its reward and from the goods of the community all are well provided for. As a contrary example, take those numerous nations that constantly pass new legislation yet never satisfactorily order their affairs. ... Where property is held privately I do not see how the common good can be achieved when each individual, by various titles accumulates as much as he can. A few rapacious and evil men divide everything among themselves, abandoning to poverty the rest of the masses who are generally more deserving. It is my conviction that unless property in this sense be abolished, there can be no equitable distribution of wealth or any real happiness in the human condition. As long as this situation exists the largest and finest segment of society will be burdened with a heavy and inescapable weight of cares and anxieties*" (p. 50). In the dialogue in Book One where this discussion is placed there is opposition to this idea from the other interlocutors and More himself objects that men cannot live in harmony where everything is held in common. There will be no gain and no motivation, no legal protection and no respect for authority. Another character in the first book, Peter Giles, also discourages this attitude and the discussion moves on to how knowledge can contribute to the advancement of society. The subject seems closed here but in fact, every social and political aspect described in detail in Book Two is intimately linked to the absence of private property of goods.

In the real world, during his lifetime, Thomas More wrote against evil and common injustice in many situations. But he wouldn't have had the naiveté to suggest this as a viable attitude. We will never know his real opinion on this crucial issue but the fact that he used the central character in his masterpiece work to voice such a problematic aspect is indicative of how deeply he felt about injustice, corruption and the distorted social order in the world he lived in. The thoughts and feelings expressed in his book

reinforce the reason for which Utopia remains in the history of ideas a profound reflection on the human condition.

### 4.3 *The city*

This section takes up the symbolic meaning of the city and suggests possible interpretations related to the Renaissance spiritual imagery.

*Civitas*, the city, is a basic functional element of utopia. The perfect city is almost organic to the constitution of utopian systems in general. There is no utopia without the imagery of the city (Scrima, 2011: 289), the u-topos which symbolically captures a kingdom of regained innocence, as if meaning to alleviate a first founding crime. In More's Utopia we are told from the very beginning that the island ("which was not always an island") was conquered by King Utopus who, at the end of the war, forced the natives to work on the separation of the captive land from the continent.

Utopia is not a city-state as is Plato's *Republic*, itself a work of utopian literature and definitely a source of inspiration for More. But the description of the cities, especially of the main city, *Amaurot*, the seat of the Utopian Senate, displays the same rational organization as the entire island. "Utopia has fifty-four spacious and noble cities, identical in language, customs, institutions and law. To know one of their cities is to know them all; for they are completely alike insofar as the land allows" (More: 55). *Amaurot* stands on a gentle slope and is almost rectangular in shape, its streets are planned for carriage travel and its attractive houses were built "front on the streets in a long unbroken line". One would say much like the terraced houses in modern Britain; and this is not the only similarity, as there is a large garden behind each house. Moreover, Utopians share a constant love for gardening with people living in England. A more utilitarian use of the garden is introduced however, as apart from flowers, Utopians grow fruits and herbs. "Now all the buildings are well-designed, three stories high and finished with stone, cement or brick. The flat roofs are covered with an inexpensive, fire-resistant plaster which surpasses lead in withstanding the elements" (p. 56).

There are two further aspects concerning the description of the city that I would like to focus on at this point. Firstly, references to each city include spacious halls reserved for the Syphogrants (Magistrates) which are equidistant from each other throughout the city. Moreover, each city has four hospitals placed outside the walls, "so spacious as to equal small cities

in themselves"; visitors, although few, are given well-constructed houses prepared for them. A bird's-eye view would reveal a rigorous, disciplined perspective.

I believe a few references can be brought out here about Renaissance cities and Italian architecture with which Thomas More was undoubtedly familiar. Utopia's cities look a lot like the Ideal Towns designed by early Renaissance architects, who used simple geometrical figures (the square, the circle) in their attempts to achieve clarity, economy and elegance. In More's Utopia, each city is divided into four equal areas and in the middle of each section there is a market-place. Although the immediate concern here does not seem to be with architecture, but utility and reasonable easiness of travelling, there is an equilibrium about the planning of each city that is not distant from urban design characteristic of Renaissance architecture. In fact, symmetry and perspective as qualities of a work of art applied both to architectural works and creations in paintings.

The imaginary cities in Utopia, with their inherent harmony, seem to be the perfect setting for the social man, an idea which is consistent with the entire Renaissance thinking and artistic endeavour. The utopian social organization also reveals an *urban* culture and this quality is definitely mirrored in the early Florentine Renaissance where spatial harmonious order "expressed a new idea about man's place in the scheme of things and man's control over his own destiny" (Clark, 1997: 99). The art historian Kenneth Clark (1997) gives credit to Piero della Francesca for what is probably the best-known image of the Renaissance *ideal town*.

Although descriptions of cities in Utopia do not reveal elegance (of the unique type achieved by Renaissance town planning) but rather efficient places, the fronted facades, flat roofs, large streets and geometrical forms suggest More's acquaintance with the Florentine set of ideas and the representation of towns as part of the philosophy of man's destiny.

Secondly, the occurrence of *four* as a number in the design of utopian cities (each city is divided into four equal parts, there are four hospitals in each city) might have an explanation in the reading of Plato's *Republic*. There's a certain symbolism attached to this number in the *Republic* and this concerns the four cardinal virtues in Platonic thought: courage, wisdom, moderation and justice. Plato inherited this distinction from the Pythagoreans for whom *four* was a number expressing perfection, completeness. The virtues are present both in the city and the soul of man, just as the Universe can be reduced to the interplay between its four basic

elements. That the city, and equally man himself, should display the same set of virtues reinforces the constant parallel drawn between the two.

This classical reference together with possible Renaissance implications are no accident in More's work, I believe. He used his vast culture in designing all the intricate elements that make up Utopia's texture. In doing so, he linked Utopia to the classical world of antiquity and at the same time skillfully planted it at the centre of his contemporary world.

## 5. Conclusions

This article highlighted several aspects related to the literary framework of More's Utopia and suggested that the imagery and the symbolic language can serve as useful interpreting devices in the economy of a book devoted to extensive scrutiny of evils in contemporary England in parallel with the reflection on an ideal world. Utopia expresses through its imagery and almost obsessive care for detail an urge to organize reality in a rational way. In doing so, it recaps on contemporary society's fundamental evils: immense poverty due to rulers' greed and violence, lack of decent employment, the typically-English danger of enclosures, the shaking foundation of justice showing little consideration for human life, the unfairness of capital punishment for theft, the huge disparity between the wealthy and the poor.

These evils are however weighted against an ideal world portrayed in detail by skillful imagery as well as valuable ideas originating in the philosophy of More's age, an age of mature belief in the intellect of man, in his power to bring about radical social change.

The mirroring symbolism of the fictitious city/island and the real-world city/island shows More's skill in using literary devices in presenting innovative ideas on how rational organization can change people's lives in an improved society. England. More's Utopia, just as Plato's, (as well as later similar fiction) captures the merging of worlds, real and imaginary and prepares the reader for a Platonic tension reflected in the dissonance between the two worlds: that of the philosopher's birth and *the one which he creates with words* (e.g. *Republic* 592A-B).

I believe we can safely say that in Thomas More's representation of utopia (just as in Plato's) the utopian city's project is closely related to the idea of the harmonious life of the human soul. The city reflects the struggle of the soul with its passions and desires, being a place ultimately designed

for the reintegration of the human being. This is why in *Utopia* nature had to be tamed and recruited in the service of the people inhabiting the island. The literary and philosophical meaning of More's masterpiece stands on the hope that the human being can regain its lost innocence and strive to live in a world without pain or constraints.



Map of the island of Utopia, woodcut by Ambrosius Holbein, 1518;  
from the 1518 edition of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*  
(Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman>)



Piero della Francesca, *Ideal Town* (15<sup>th</sup> century)

### References

1. BACHELARD, G. (1960). *La poétique de la rêverie*, Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France
2. CLARK, K. (1977). *Civilisation*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray
3. GREENE, J., J. (1967). *Introduction in The Essential Thomas More*, A Mentor-Omega Book - New York and Toronto: The New American Library
4. LOCHRIE, K. (2016). *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
5. MORE, Th. (ed. 1967, English translation). *Utopia*, in *The Essential Thomas More*, A Mentor-Omega Book - New York and Toronto: The New American Library
6. PLATON, (1986). *Republica*, Opere V, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică
7. SAMPSON, G. and R. C. CHURCHILL (1970). *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, London: The English Language book Society and Cambridge University Press
8. SARGENT, L. T. (2010). *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
9. SCRIMA, A. (2010). *Ideologie și Utopie*, in *Funcția critică a credinței*, București: Humanitas
10. SHAKESPEARE, W. (ed. 1978). *The Tempest*, in *Complete works*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
11. SUVIN, D. (1988). *Science Fiction and Utopian Fiction: Degrees of Kinship*, in *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
12. WEGNER, Ph. (2002). *Imaginary communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press

### Online sources:

1. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman> Retrieved 11 June 2020
2. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=plato-ethics>