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COMMUNICATIONS

A NEW SOURCE FOR MORE'S 'UTOPIA'*

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In a letter to Erasmus dated 3 September 1516, Thomas More wrote: 'I am sending you my "Nowhere", which is nowhere well written'.[1] More's use of the Latin word '*nusquam*' in this sentence (not 'Utopia', as one might have expected) made explicit what would have been apparent to any reader of the book with a knowledge of Greek: that the island of Utopia which the character Raphael Hythloday describes is 'nowhere'. The name 'Utopia', those readers would have known, was a compound of the Greek adverb '*ou*', meaning 'not', with the noun '*topos*', or 'place'. The non-existence of Utopia operates throughout the work as a joke with at least two dimensions. On one level, the story Hythloday tells is ostensibly presented as fact, whereas humanist readers with a knowledge of Greek would have known it to be fiction. But additionally, Hythloday's argument (against the objections to communism voiced by 'More') that communal living really does work in Utopia is ironically undercut by the fact that Utopia is nowhere at all. Why More should choose to make this second joke is in a way the most fundamental question for the interpretation of *Utopia*, for if we do not understand why More thinks it is important that the commonwealth Hythloday describes is 'nowhere', we will not be able to understand what More is doing in the work as a whole.

Previous interpreters have more or less uniformly accepted that the name 'Utopia' refers to a passage in Plato's *Republic*, where one of Socrates' interlocutors observes that their imaginary Republic 'can be found nowhere on earth'.[2] In the following pages I

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[1] 'Nusquamam nostram nusquam bene scriptam ad te mitto: praescripsi epistolam ad Petrum meum.' In P. S. Allen, ed., *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roderdami* (Oxford, 1958), II, no. 461, lines 1–2. Translation by Marcus Haworth from Elizabeth Rogers, ed., *St. Thomas More: selected letters*, (New Haven, Conn., 1961), no. 6, p. 73. Rogers notes without explanation that '*Nusquam*' was 'More's first choice of title for the *Utopia*,' p. 73, n. 1.

[2] Plato, *Republic*, IX, 592. Loeb Classical Library, VI, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 415. These interpreters may have been unduly influenced into accepting a Greek source by the fact that the '*ou-topia*' of More's title is in Greek. But the word '*outopia*' does not appear in the passage from the *Republic* noted above; Plato uses the word '*oudamos*'. More seems to have coined the term 'Utopia' himself. By pointing to More's curious use of the word '*nusquam*' in his letter to Erasmus (as well as in two other letters concerned with *Utopia*'s publication – Rogers, *Selected letters*, no. 7, p. 76 and no. 9, p. 80), I want to suggest that More could just as easily be alluding to a Latin source through a Greek compound. It goes without saying that the option of naming the island '*Nusquam*' was simply not open to More, as this would have given away the joke.

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want to argue that the word 'Utopia' is instead (or additionally)[3] a deliberate allusion to a passage from a work of classical antiquity which has previously been ignored by most interpreters of *Utopia*: Seneca's essay *De otio* ('On leisure').[4] Such a view would have significant implications for the interpretation of the work as a whole; in the last part of this note I attempt to outline what I take those implications to be.

The passage in question occurs near the end of Seneca's essay, which considers the relative merits of the active and contemplative lives. After arguing that the wise man will inevitably be prevented from participating in public affairs by the evils of politics, Seneca draws a conclusion with startlingly 'Utopian' overtones:

> But if that republic which we dream of can nowhere be found, leisure begins to be a necessity for all of us, because the one thing that might have been preferred to leisure, *nowhere is* [*nusquam est*].[5]

This passage, with its striking evocation of the chief themes of *Utopia*, brings to mind a number of related facts which make Seneca's essay a highly plausible source for More's '*nusquam*'. The *De otio* would unquestionably have been familiar to More as a classic exposition of one of two opposing positions taken by Stoic philosophers in the debate over the relative merits of the active and contemplative lives.[6] Indeed, Seneca and Cicero (the leading exponent of the opposite position in the debate) are specifically cited in the dialogue as the only two Latin writers whom Hythloday has found to have anything valuable to say about philosophy.[7] Moreover, Book I of *Utopia* treats the same theme as Seneca's *De otio*, the question of whether the wise man ought to involve himself in public affairs.[8] Seneca's answer to this question in his essay is essentially the same as that given by Hythloday in the dialogue of Book I. He defends his decision to retire to a life of contemplative leisure by reference to the Stoic Zeno's teaching that the wise man 'will engage in public affairs unless something prevents him'.[9] But since all

[3] The *De otio* need not, of course, be the exclusive source for the allusion. There may be good reason to think that More is also alluding to the passage in the *Republic* as well; that sort of double-allusion would have pleased both him and his humanist readers.

[4] An interesting treatment of another aspect of More's use of Seneca (though neglecting the *De otio*) was offered by John Crossett in 'More and Seneca', *Philological Quarterly*, 40 (1961), 577–80.

[5] 'Quodsi non invenitur illa res publica, quam nobis fingimus, incipit omnibus esse otium necessarium, quia quod unum praeferri poterat otio, nusquam est.' Seneca, *De otio*, Loeb Classical Library, *Moral Essays*, II, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), p. 200. Emphasis mine.

[6] Indeed, Erasmus appears to have worked extensively on Seneca, among other classical and Patristic authors, during his 1509–1514 sojourn in England (when he was in close contact with More). He also completed an edition of Seneca close to the time of *Utopia*'s composition, a fact mentioned by More in a letter of the same period. Rogers, *Selected letters*, p. 64 (n.) and no. 5, p. 73.

[7] *Utopia*, Book I: 48/33-50/3. *The Yale edition of the complete works of St. Thomas More*, IV, eds. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, Conn., 1965). Citations refer to the Latin text in this edition; quotations are taken from the facing-page translation. More seems to have shared Hythloday's opinion of the Romans. In his 1518 letter to Oxford University, he states flatly that, 'Nam in philosophia, exceptis duntaxat his, quae Cicero et Seneca, nihil habent latinorum scholae, nisi vel graecum, uel quod e graeca lingua traductam est'. ['For in philosophy, apart from the works left by Cicero and Seneca, the schools of the Latins have nothing to offer that is not either Greek or translated from Greek.'] *Yale complete works*, XV, ed. Daniel Kinney, 142/18–21.

[8] The dialogue rehearses the arguments over the relative merits of the active and contemplative lives, between *negotium* and *otium*. For a very helpful account of how this debate figures in Book I, see Quentin Skinner, 'Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the language of Renaissance humanism', in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The languages of political theory in early-modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987).

[9] '"Accedet ad rem publicam, nisi si quid impedierit".' Seneca, *De otio*, p. 184. See also Diogenes Laertius' 'Life of Zeno', Loeb Classical Library, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, II, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), p. 224.

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commonwealths will always be inhospitable to wisdom, according to Seneca, the wise man will always be prevented from active participation:

> What difference does it make in what manner the wise man arrives at leisure – whether because no state is available to him or because he is not available to the state – if he is nowhere to find a state? … If I should attempt to enumerate [the states of the world] one by one, I should not find a single one which could tolerate the wise man or which the wise man could tolerate.[10]

This argument is, of course, identical with Hythloday's position throughout Book I as he resists More's suggestion that he should join the council of a prince.[11] He maintains that his counsel would be unheeded in the court of any prince, since all princes are obsessed with war and self-aggrandizement and surrounded by toadying counsellors. They would simply turn 'deaf ears' to his advice. Given these similarities, it seems even more likely that More might be directly alluding to the passage quoted above in giving his imaginary commonwealth the name of '*nusquam*'. For, of course, both 'nowhere' and (arguably) 'that republic which we dream of' (that is to say, Utopia) are just what Hythloday appeals to in justifying his decision to forsake the active life.

Accepting the *De otio* as a source for the name 'Utopia' would imply that the active life issue, and the accompanying problem of leisure, were among More's chief concerns from the very inception of his Utopian project. Such an interpretation, however, must immediately confront the problem that the active life issue is only explicitly treated in Book I, which, according to More's fellow humanist and frequent collaborator, Erasmus, was composed almost a year after Book II had been completed.[12] J. H. Hexter, in a very influential interpretation of *Utopia* published in 1952, argued that Book II originally constituted (in More's eyes) a complete work.[13] According to Hexter, Book I was added later as a sort of afterthought, to serve as an introduction and perhaps to add something substantive. To really follow More's intentions, in other words, it is necessary to read the two books in reverse order. If Hexter's interpretive framework[14] is correct and Book I does indeed constitute an afterthought to a completed whole, then the case for Seneca's *De otio* as a source for the name 'Utopia' would be considerably weakened (since, according to Hexter, More would have already named his republic 'Utopia' during the first stage of composition in 1515).[15] Within Hexter's framework, Seneca's *De otio* could be accepted as a source for the name of More's 'Utopia' only if the active life issue can be shown to be a concern in Book II as well.

But, of course, the fundamental fact about Utopian life as described in Book II is that while no one is idle, everyone has time for good and beneficial leisure. Hythloday remarks that Utopian abundance should not be surprising when one considers 'how

[10] 'Quid autem interest, quomodo sapiens ad otium veniat, utrum quia res publica illi deest, an quia ipse rei publicae, si non ubivis futura res publica est? … Si percensere singulas voluero, nullam inveniam, quae sapientem aut quam sapiens pati possit.' Seneca, *De otio*, p. 200.

[11] The argument is most fully illustrated by Hythloday in the episode at the French king's court, at *Utopia*, Book I: 86/20-96/31.

[12] Erasmus, to Ulrich von Hutten, 23 July 1519. Letter no. 999, *The correspondence of Erasmus*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, annotated by Peter G. Bietenholz (Toronto, 1974), VII, lines 279–84.

[13] J. H. Hexter, *More's 'Utopia': the biography of an idea* (Princeton, 1952). See also Hexter's introduction to the Yale edition of *Utopia*.

[14] Here I distinguish between the factual question of the chronology of the two Books' composition and the interpretive inferences that Hexter draws from it.

[15] Indeed, whether or not Seneca's *De otio* is accepted as the source for the word 'Utopia', this remains somewhat puzzling, since the only other likely source (the passage in Plato's *Republic*) appears (though more arguably) to refer to the same issue.

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large a part of the population in other countries exists without working', while in Utopia no one is exempted.[16] By a fair distribution of labour, Utopians have achieved their virtuous commonwealth, and by doing so they have solved the problem about *negotium* examined in Book I. Philosophers such as Hythloday need not be restricted from participating in politics by the wickedness of the polity; indeed, in Utopia the wise are the rulers (as they were in Plato's Republic).[17] In More's Europe, 'men talk freely of the public welfare – but look after their private interests only'.[18] But in Utopia, 'where nothing is private, they seriously concern themselves with public affairs [*publicum negotium*]'.[19]

Everyone shares equally in the Ciceronian *negotium* of Utopia; yet everyone has Senecan *otium* as well. We are told that the Utopians 'in general are easy-going, good-tempered, ingenious and leisure-loving. They patiently do their share of manual labour when occasion demands, though otherwise they are by no means fond of it.'[20] The Utopians work only six hours each day; the rest of the time (apart from meals and sleep) 'are left to every man's discretion, not to waste in revelry or idleness, but to devote the time free from work to some other occupation according to taste'.[21] Indeed, Hythloday tells us, when abundance has been achieved the magistrates frequently shorten the work-day:

> For the authorities do not keep the citizens against their will at superfluous labour, since the constitution of their commonwealth looks in the first place to this sole object: that for all the citizens, as far as the public needs permit, as much time as possible should be withdrawn from the service of the body and devoted to the freedom and culture of the mind. It is in the latter that they deem the happiness of life to consist.[22]

That the happiness of life consists in withdrawing from the service of the body to cultivate the freedom and culture of the mind was a key axiom of Stoic philosophy, the most prominent exponent of which, for More and his contemporaries, was Seneca. Most previous interpreters of *Utopia* have taken Hythloday's description of the Utopians' ostensibly hedonistic moral philosophy to be an adaptation of the Epicurean position, and there are of course a number of superficial resemblances between Utopian moral philosophy and that of the Stoics' chief opponents.[23] But it is a curious fact that Epicureanism is not explicitly cited as a parallel of the Utopians' ideas about virtues; indeed, the only moral teachings explicitly identified with the Utopians' beliefs are those

[16] 'Quam magna populi pars iners degit.' *Utopia*, Book II: 128/35.

[17] *Utopia*, Book II: 122–4.

[18] 'Siquidem alibi de publico loquentes ubique commodo, priuatum curant.' *Utopia*, Book II: 238/1–2.

[19] 'Hic ubi nihil priuati est, serio publicum negotium agunt, certe utrobique merito.' *Utopia*, Book II: 238/1–3.

[20] 'Gens facilis ac faceta, sollers, ocio gaudens, corporis laborum (quum est usus), satis patiens, Caeterum alias haudquaquam sane appetens.' *Utopia*, Book II: 178/30–180/1.

[21] 'Quicquid inter operis horas ac somi cibique medium esset, id suo cuiusque arbitrio permittitur, non quo per luxum, aut segnitiem abutatur, sed quod ab opificio suo liberum, ex animi sententia in aliud quippiam studij bene collocet.' Utopia, Book II: 126/32–128/3.

[22] 'Neque enim superuacaneo labore ciues inuitos exercent magistratus: quandoquidem eius reipublicae institutio hunc unum scopum in primis respicit: ut quoad per publicas necessitates licet: quam plurimum temporis ab seruitio corporis ad animi libertatem cultumque ciuibus uniuersis assuratur. In eo enim sitiam uitae felicitatem putant.' *Utopia*, Book II: 134/15–20.

[23] Like Epicurus, the Utopians believe that certain pleasures are true, others false; also like Epicurus, they believe that the wise man will not choose a pleasure that interferes with experiencing a greater pleasure. *Utopia*, Book II: 162/7–15.

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of the Stoics.[24] The tenets of Utopian moral philosophy which most directly conflict with Epicurus' teachings are precisely those affirmed by the Stoics: their belief in the existence and providence of God, in the immortality of the soul, and in an afterlife with rewards and punishments.[25] Furthermore, the Utopians believe that only good and honest pleasure should be pursued. They hold that virtue alone draws men to good and honest pleasure. And they employ the Stoic definition of virtue as living according to nature, which they equate with obeying the dictates of reason.[26] Thus the qualifications the Utopians attach to their quasi-Epicurean ideal of pleasure serve to purge it of the undesirable qualities which made it unpalatable to the Stoics. Such a rehabilitation was of course a common objective of humanist declamations as well as their classical sources; but intriguingly, just such a rehabilitation of the Epicurean ideal of leisure was what Seneca had provided in the *De otio*.[27]

And indeed, in a good many other ways Stoic philosophy may provide a rationale for the much-discussed Utopian institutions that seem to conflict with Christian tradition. The Stoics were enthusiastic proponents of the morality of suicide in appropriate circumstances, as are the Utopians (and as sixteenth-century Christians could never have been).[28] Stoic doctrine may also provide support for the Utopians' precocious rationale for their imperialism.[29] The Utopians, it will be recalled,

> consider it a most just cause for war when a people which does not use its soil but keeps it idle and waste nevertheless forbids the use and possession of it to others who by the rule of nature ought to be maintained by it.[30]

Like the Utopians, the Stoics believed that ownership was a function of good use:

> Everything belongs to the wise. For the law, they say, has conferred upon them a perfect right to all things. It is true that certain things are said to belong to the bad, just as what has been dishonestly acquired may be said, in one sense, to belong to the state, in another sense to those who are enjoying it.[31]

Most importantly, the Stoics believed, as do the Utopians, that the wise would hold all things in common:

> Friendship, they declare, exists only between the wise and good, by reason of their likeness to one another. And by friendship they mean a common use of all that has to do with life, wherein we treat our friends as we do ourselves.[32]

[24] In a marginal gloss: 'Hoc iuxta Stoicos.' ['The definition of the Stoics.'] *Utopia*, Book II: 162/19.

[25] Hythloday presents these beliefs, in which he says the Utopians seek defence for their hedonism, at *Utopia*, Book II: 160/31–162/4. Edward Surtz points out how this relates to the debate between the Stoics and the Epicureans in *The praise of pleasure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 26.

[26] *Utopia*, Book II: 162/15–22. It is to this passage that the marginal gloss quoted above refers.

[27] Seneca, *De otio*, p. 182.

[28] *Utopia*, Book II: 186/5–22. For the Stoic rationale of suicide, see J. M. Rist, *Stoic philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 233–55.

[29] I am grateful to Richard Tuck for pointing out to me how unusual (possibly even unprecedented) the Utopians' justification for their imperialism actually is. If my argument here is correct, it raises the intriguing possibility that Stoic moral theory might be the indirect progenitor of a whole host of 'use-right' justifications for property and imperialism.

[30] 'Nam eam iustissimam belli causam ducunt, quum populus quispiam eius soli quo ipse non utitur, sed uelut inane ac uacuum possidet, alijs tamen qui ex naturae praescripto inde nutriri debeant, usum ac possessionem interdicat.' *Utopia*, Book II: 136/14–17.

[31] Diogenes Laertius, 'Life of Zeno', p. 228.

[32] Ibid. p. 228. The Stoics also endorse the community of wives (p. 234), as does Plato in the *Republic* (pp. 152–8). Erasmus [to Ulrich von Hutten, letter no. 999, lines 275–7] tells us More

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These points of congruence between Utopia and Stoicism should hardly be surprising. Utopia (we are told) is a society which has never received divine revelation and lives instead by the dictates of reason alone. For a Northern humanist seeking to postulate what the dictates of reason in the absence of revelation would have required, there would have been no more respected model of right reason among the pagans than Stoic philosophy. And if More was indeed appropriating the name of his imaginary republic from that foremost Stoic, Seneca, it seems even more likely that the life of the Stoic sage which Seneca endorsed may also provide the rationale for much of the absurd wisdom that constitutes the Utopians' way of life.

Thus, a careful reading of Book II reveals that both the theme of leisure and activity and the ideal of the Stoic sage receive a complex treatment in Book II; and this makes sense if the *De otio* was a source for More's '*nusquam*', for then both issues must have been deeply embedded in the Utopian project from its inception. But if this is so, then it casts grave doubts on the soundness of Hexter's interpretive framework, for the very reasons that initially appeared to make acceptance of the *De otio* as a source problematic. For if More's 'Utopia' refers to the '*nusquam*' passage in Seneca's *De otio*, then *both* Book I and Book II are dependent upon a source that directly links the active life debate of Book I with the philosophic 'nowhere' that constitutes Book II. But then it cannot possibly be the case that in More's eyes Book II initially constituted a complete whole independent of the issues treated in Book I, as Hexter argued. It is thus an essential component of my argument that Hexter's interpretive framework ought to be overturned or at least significantly revised.[33]

Such a revision would open the way to appreciating a much richer unity of theme between Book I and Book II than scholars influenced by Hexter's framework have been willing to permit. It would also allow the ideal of the Stoic sage as praised by Seneca to be explored as a more important source for many of the Utopians' beliefs and practices than has previously been recognized. Part of my purpose in this note has been to suggest how both of these revisions might be incorporated into a fuller understanding of *Utopia*. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to furnish an alternative reading; but I think two general inferences, one positive, the other negative, can quickly be drawn. The problem posed by Seneca in the *De otio* was that 'if that republic which we dream of can nowhere be found, leisure begins to be a necessity for all of us'. The fact that the Utopians, citizens of More's 'Nowhere', have made a virtue of that necessity suggests the identification in More's mind of his 'Utopia' with 'that republic which we dream of', and by extension perhaps also the '*optimus status reipublicae*' of the book's title. But even if the Senecan framework tends to suggest that Utopia is (for More) the best state of a commonwealth, the fundamental interpretive problem of *Utopia* seems to remain intact. For in that case More's point must surely be that 'the best state of a commonwealth' is in fact *nowhere*. What we are to make of that troubling fact, as 'More' remarks in the dialogue's conclusion, is a topic that seems always to be left to another occasion.

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had in his youth written a 'paradoxical' dialogue praising Plato's communism and extending it even to wives.

[33] Indeed, whether or not the *De otio* is accepted as a source, the close connection between the concerns of the two books seems to me to make this conclusion inescapable.

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