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Traveller's dialogues and early modern utopia¹

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1. Introduction: anti-literary tendencies in utopian studies

Scholarly literature on early modern utopias has for a long time been at best indifferent, but often even straightforwardly inimical to the treatment of utopias as proper literary works. Whereas the content of utopian texts has been meticulously studied by many disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology or political theory), literary studies has been more or less deaf to the potential literary merits of the genre. Although from the mid-20th century, the situation has somewhat been amended, particularly through the works of Robert C. Elliott and Northop Frye, the study of utopias is largely dominated by content-based approaches even today. To give only a few examples, J. C. Davis's *Utopia and the ideal society: a study of English utopian writing 1516-1700* is founded on the premise that "a serious study of the political thought of early modern utopias is warranted and in some respects overdue" (Davis 1981, 1). Although Davis's exclusive concern in his book is the political thought of utopias, he sometimes also reflects upon the formal aspects of the works. Among such reflections, one might be worried to read that "[utopian authors] are not always aware of those utopian writers who have preceded them. In fact, such awareness is very rare indeed." If besides their political positions, one also considers the formal structure of utopian texts, the influence of the predecessors is so plain that this point becomes simply unwarranted. The sociologist Kumar goes even further, and claims that "the literary form of utopia should [not be an important concern] in any serious treatment of utopia (Kumar 1987, 25)". In opposition to this and similar opinions, in the present paper I would like to argue for the legitimacy of a more literary approach towards early modern utopias. I suggest that Thomas More's first English imitators are not only following the pattern of More's work in terms of its contents, but they are equally influenced by its dialogic form. Before turning my attention to the texts themselves, let me just briefly evoke some of the formal aspects of Thomas More's work.

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2. Thomas More's Utopia as a dialogue

Thomas More's main work is aptly reflecting the asymmetric proportions in utopian studies. Everyone knows that the work is divided into two books, and that the first one is usually called the *Dialogue of Counsel*, whereas the second is the *Discourse on Utopia*. However, secondary literature is much more obsessed with the second book, where Utopia, the island is described, while the less utopian first book, the typical discussion among humanistic friends, is rather neglected. As part of the argumentation, Ian Lakowski has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of More in his dissertation which was written in the early 1990s, and he was worried to see that out of the 600 items related to *Utopia*, more than 80 percent deal exclusively with the second book, whereas the first book receives exclusive attention only in about 10 percent of the items (Lakowski 1993). One of the reasons why he finds such a distorted balance problematic is related to the question of utopia as a genre. According to his opinion, at the time of its composition, More's work could not yet align to the genre of utopia, as such a genre was not yet existing, it was in effect incidentally created by More. Therefore, he asserts, it is rather questionable to interpret More's work as a utopia, because when we do it, we are inevitably meandering into the pitfall of scholarly anachronism. However dubious Lakowski's genre-related claims should be, the alternative he proposes is rather stimulating. In his opinion, *Utopia* should be read as a literary dialogue submitting itself to the conventions of a genre quite popular in More's time. This possible link between More's text and the Renaissance dialogue has been treated by a number of scholars, but for brevity's sake, let me here just sum up the main point with the help of a handy diagram. [SLIDE 2. SOME REMARKS?] This shows that the rhetorical structure of *Utopia* conforms to the dialogic ideals drafted in 16th century Italian theoretical works on dialogue. While the first book can be read as the *praeparatio/vestibule*, the conventional part where the speakers are introduced, the second part might be read as the *contentio*, where the *quaestio* or *thesis* is tested by the two competitors, the thesis being the need for communal property, and the competitors being Hythloday and More. This approach to *Utopia* is useful because it offers a view of the work in its totality, and identifies dialogicity on several levels. There is the **dialogue** (let's call it the scene of speaking), which is going on among More, Giles and Hythloday, concluded at the end of the second book with More's sceptic remarks. There is also an **embedded dialogue**, when Hythloday recalls a conversation in Cardinal Morton's house, and there is a **dialogue around the main text** as well, when the typical humanistic friendly letters surrounding the work enter into a conversation with each other. This way, the second book appears as a more

integrated unit within a larger dialogic framework. Besides all these layers of dialogicity, there is also a self-reflective key in the first book, a sort of ars poetica of humanistic dialogues that is unfortunately only apparent in the Latin version of the text. [SLIDE 3.] As Jean Francois Vallée highlights, in several places of the first book, the Yale edition of *Utopia* translates the Latin *sermo* (*discussion, conversation*) as *idea* (Vallée 2004, 47-8). However, the debate that is going on between Hythloday and More is not about ideas but about the nature of *sermo*, or dialogue. This short overview hopefully proved that More's work is closely related with the genre of Renaissance dialogues, so it is time to turn our attention to the first English followers.

3. English dialogic utopias of the 1570s, 1580s

[SLIDE 4.] Lyman Tower Sargent's seminal bibliography contains a very interesting collection of texts published between 1579 and 1583. All of these works feature the word 'dialogue' on their title pages, and they are presenting a conversation in which one of the participants is always a traveller. In what follows, I would like to analyse the structure of the first of these texts, and to relate it to the other two examples on one hand, and with More's text on the other hand.

A Pleasant Dialogue betweene a Lady Called Listra and a Pilgrim was published anonymously, but it is rather convincingly attributed to Thomas Nicholas (HRI Origins/Listra). The text is described by Sargent in the following manner: "Small town of good Christians. Emphasis on piety, equity and honesty. There is a godly prince, humble nobility, obedient citizens and a good clergy (Sargent 1988, 1)." This concise description can not really shed light upon the connection between *Utopia* and *Listra*. However, it is clear that the work has strong debts to More, and this is true from at least two aspects. The first is the **general narrative setting**. Listra is a Lady from Corinth, and he bumps into a traveller, this time a pilgrim. The dialogue in the first book is governed by Listra's questions, and the structure of the clergy, the legal system and the public offices are discussed in an elaborate and at times rather burthensome manner. The weightiest part is related to the legal system in Crangalor, and it is clear that the case for poor people's equal legal representation is a shared concern with More's work as a writer and as an undersheriff as well. But More's influence is also apparent in the formal aspects of the work. Already the preface initiates a play between fact and fiction that is characteristic of *Utopia*, and its paratextual position is another link with the complementary materials surrounding the genre-founding work. The preface, rather

unconventionally written by a fictional woman, is addressed to a real person. And this playfulness is preserved throughout the work, which is reflected not so much in the content as in the general structure. [SLIDE 5.] The main text begins under the heading “The Dialogue”, but the first lines are written in third person singular. After the minimalist description of the scene of speaking, that is, the encounter between the lady and the pilgrim, the text transforms into dialogue proper with the following words: “[to the pilgrime] the Lady sayeth as follows: (N. 1579, vol1, Aiiir)”. Then the whole discussion about the above-mentioned topics is carried out in a rather simplistic dialogue form, but Listra’s role as the questioner surpasses the usual restricted role of women in contemporary dialogues (HRI Origins/Listra). At the end of the volume, there is a very interesting **verse dialogue** between the personified book and the pilgrim, which is obviously indebted to the prefatory verses and letters surrounding *Utopia*, even if its moralistic content might be less exciting than the Utopian alphabet or the verse written in the Utopian tongue.

The playfulness extends and increases in the second book. Unparalleled in other utopian texts of the time, the interlocutors switch positions, and now it is the pilgrim who sends his regards to Edward Diar. The main text retains the dialogic form, yet Listra’s role as a partner in the conversation diminishes, and the book is to some extent appropriated by the pilgrim, just like Raphael appropriates the second book of *Utopia*. There is another verse dialogue between the book and the pilgrim, but it is this time placed not after, but before the main text. Just like in the first book, there is a change from third person singular narrative to dialogic form, but with a small hitch (see on the slide in red): “**P:** Madam, **quoth he**, the blessing of God...” – although the speaker is already signified with his initial, the **Sg3** form is also preserved, which suggests some insecurity at the point of transition. [SLIDE 6.] To sum up, *Listra* seems to rely on More not only in its contents and its idealistic social programme, but also in its concern for the dialogic form, which appears in the text on almost as many layers as in More’s work. Besides the main dialogue, there is a dialogue between the narrators and a real person, a verse dialogue between the book and the pilgrim, and in a certain sense, because of the analogous structure, there is a dialogue between the first book and the second book as well. All this suggests that *Listra* is as much informed by utopia in terms of its content as it is in terms of its form.

4. *The other two dialogues*

Due to a lack of time, I can only outline some ideas concerning the other two dialogues, which share many characteristics with both *Listra* and *Utopia*. [SLIDE 7.] From the three dialogues, it is probably Thomas Lupton's *Siquila. Too good to be true...* that bears the closest and most direct formal resemblances with More's text. Already its title page abounds with rather obvious allusions to the great predecessor. The author is marked as Siquila, the partner in the conversation is Omen, who is from the perfect land of Mauqsun. These words are crafted in a way rather similar to the application of place names in *Utopia*, however, the playfulness is a little bit destroyed by the author as he too often highlights that the story of this unknown land is "too good to be true", and at one point becomes so pedant that he warns the reader that the names should be read "e converso", that is, backwards, and then the reporter could not be accused with falsity (Lupton 1580, Aii^r). There is a palpable anxiety about the text's own fictitiousness here.

Stubbes text, *The Anatomy of Abuses* is probably the best known from the three for its violently anti-theatrical tone (Stubbes 1583). This book, similar to the other two, was written in dialogue form, and it was also published in two volumes. The form and structure of the text is somewhat overshadowed by its fervent anti-theatrical stance, however, if we juxtapose it to *Listra* and *Siquila*, other weightpoints seem to emerge. Just like *Listra*, it is surrounded by prefatory letters, commendatory verses, and even features a verse dialogue between the author and the book. It is also a dialogue between two persons, Spudeus and Philoponus, and the latter is again a traveller, who recalls his rather gruesome experiences in the imaginary land *Ailgna*. It is obvious that there is an analogy here which calls for more thorough analysis.

5. *Conclusion*

To sum up, it seems that around 1580 there is a constellation of texts which share a similar moralistic agenda, while at the same time, their governing narrative is an explicitly utopian one. And at this early stage, utopian content inevitably calls for the use of the dialogue form. This is where the scantily charted literary history of English Renaissance dialogue could serve as an explanation. Although in sheer numbers, dialogue had been quite popular in England (more than 200 dialogues were printed until the end of the 16th century), this popularity is not reflected in literary histories about the period. In what is to the best of my knowledge the only monograph on English dialogues which has a dedicated chapter on the link between utopias and Renaissance dialogues, Christopher Warner is searching for the roots of this neglect.

According to his opinion, the basic problem is that More's text is *too* good as a dialogue. Actually, so good that not one of the numerous English dialogues can get even close to it. However, he thinks that it is not completely fair to impose such expectations upon texts that are produced in a different language and in a different cultural setting. The proper approach to these texts, he argues, is one that looks at them as **clusters of dialogues**, that is dialogues which are not standing alone, but enter into a conversation with similar texts published in a close temporal proximity (Warner 2004, 66). Without doubt, the three utopian dialogues mentioned above comprise such a thematic cluster. Should I have more time, I could cite places where all these texts deal with the same topic in similar way: for example, the case of marital offences is in spotlight in all of them, whereas hauntingly similar descriptions of charivaris are featured in at least two of them. On the other hand, the use of dialogue is also related to the problem of distinguishing fact from fiction. Nina Chordas claims that dialogue "[occupies] a middle ground between ... fiction and nonfiction," and that its popularity in utopias is related to the general distrust against imaginative literature, which can be obviously felt in the three Puritan dialogues discussed above (Chordas 2010, 29).

Thus I hope I could prove that the interrelatedness of utopia, dialogue, and fictionality calls for further investigation, and also that in such an investigation, not only content-related similarities, but also formal analogies should be observed. As Károly Pintér argues in a recent book, "literary utopias, regardless of the political biases of their authors, are first and foremost intellectual and literary games, created by the author who invites readers to join in, to play with him/her and enjoy themselves (Pintér 2010, 42)." It would be far too much to claim that the three texts discussed here are *above all* literary games. However, the playfulness that we admire so much in More's text and in later utopias has at least its traces in them. And read with an eye on this aspect certainly puts them into a new, exciting light. I hope that I could also make a case for the general thesis of my dissertation on early modern English utopias, where I will argue for the necessity of seeking a balance between purely formal and purely thematic treatments of these works.

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