A Man for All Eras:
Recent Books on Thomas More


"That's just what I have been saying," he said. "There is no place for philosophers among 'ldngs."

"Yes, there is," I answered, "but not for that academic philosophy which fits everything neatly into place. There is, however, another, more sophisticated philosophy which accommodates itself to the scene at hand and acts its part with polish and finesse. It is this philosophy that you should use."

*Utopia*, Book I

Thomas More ranks with William Langland before him, and Edmund Burke after him, among the greatest of our Reforming Conservatives.... [They] place almost first among the order of things which has come down to them, and which they feel it their duty to preserve, such a measure of unity, small or great, as the Christendom of their age has been able to inherit.

On January 14, 1999, Congressman Henry Hyde, on the floor of the United States' Senate, spoke thus:

Sir Thomas More, the most brilliant lawyer of his generation, a scholar with an international reputation, the center of a warm and affectionate family life which he cherished, went to his death rather than take an oath in vain.'

The speaker was Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and the occasion was the opening of the impeachment trial of President William Jefferson Clinton. For Robert Bolt, in the introduction to his play *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), More was "a man with an adamantine sense of his own self". In his Volume 2 of his *History of the English Speaking Peoples* (1956), Winston Churchill wrote that

More stood forth as the defender of all that was finest in the medieval outlook. He represents to history its universality, its belief in spiritual values, and its instinctive sense of other-worldliness.

G. K. Chesterton considered that

He may be counted the greatest Englishman, or at least the greatest historical character in English history. For he was above all things historic; he represented at once a type, a turning point and an ultimate destiny.¹

More was also a hero of the old Soviet Union. Seen as a proto-communist, his name appeared on an obelisk unveiled in Moscow's Alexandrovsky Gardens in 1918. And not only in the last century was More seen as highly significant. Jonathan Swift wrote in his *Concerning the Universal Hatred Which Prevails Against the Clergy* that More was "a person of the greatest virtue this Kingdom ever produced". A man for all seasons indeed, and for all kinds of people, appealing here to a conservative American Republican, an agnostic British liberal, a Whiggish Conservative British Prime Minister, an
English Catholic apologist, atheistic Russian Communists, and a Tory Anglican priest with anti-Catholic views. Moreover, Thomas More has probably never been read, or read about, so widely as he is today, fascinating scholars and general public alike. He has become the patron of innumerable schools and colleges, and by act of the present Pope, recently became the patron of politicians and statesmen. The contours of his life are inscribed on the consciousness of diverse and widely separated peoples, such that his iconic and dramatic status, invaluable to us though it is, can easily obscure what is just as important for us—his writings.

These recent four books, constituting four quite different approaches to Thomas More, typify the breadth of interest in the man and his ideas. John Guy, a professor of history, gives us an historiographical overview of approaches to More's life, and the problems in assessing that life; Alvaro de Silva, priest and professor of theology, gives us an accessible edition of More's last letters; Gerard Wegemer, a professor of literature, provides us with critical analysis of More's contribution to political thought; and Peter Ackroyd, a prize-winning biographer and novelist, has given us a popular biography of some depth. These writers, coming from different fields, and with different aims, demonstrate More's enduring appeal. Each book should be seen as indispensable for the student of Thomas More, and each book moves us on from the picture of More which was established in Richard Marius's *Thomas More (1984)*.

Marius's biography carries with it the authority of a distinguished scholar who is immersed in More's writings. Before his death in 1999, Marius had worked on the fifteen-volume Yale *Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, editing (with others) Volumes 6, 7 and 8: *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1981); the *Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter against Frith* (1990); and *The Conflation of Tyndale's Answer* (1973) respectively. Marius was thus, as John Guy says, "the pre-eminent authority on the anti-Lutheran campaign"⁵, and his close acquaintance with these anti-heresy works informs much of his psychological interpretation. Marius's main achievement, considers Guy, is "less his characterization of More, which is provocative and will continue to be disputed,
than his willingness to refocus the debate: not simply to chronicle what More allegedly did as an inquisitor, but to explain why he did it. Marius suggests that More's preoccupation with heresy began much earlier than has usually been supposed. It began when he became Henry VIII's "theological councillor" in 1521, not when he became Lord Chancellor in 1529, and in the examination of Lutheran books More's views on Catholic "consensus" and conscience began to be formalized.

Any reservations about Marius's work should be prefaced with an outline of his achievement. His discussion of More's works is the best part of the book, and Marius never fails to enlighten with judicious and subtle insights. (His view of *Utopia* is well-balanced, except that the idea that More would have been at home in the quasi-monastic atmosphere of his imagined state relies on Marius's misinterpretation of More's Charterhouse period.) He has a broad grasp of the Reformation arguments, and an appreciation of the intellectual bases of the world that produced them. He gives a prominent place, also, to the intellectual background of English common law, as More would have received it from Fortescue, and points us towards the importance of natural law and conscience in More that has been developed by more recent scholars. Marius has a strong sense of the literary values of More's writings, and gives us, for example, an illuminating discussion of the *History of King Richard III*. Marius takes extensive time with the lesser known controversial writings. His is a large book mainly because it goes into such detail with the intellectual background, and the contest of texts and arguments which engaged Thomas More with increasing force. Marius may finally be seen to be more authoritative on the Reformation controversy, and the issues at stake, than he is about the man at the center of the biography, a man whom Marius repeatedly confesses to finding a mystery.

Marius's book reflects the revisionist view of More, a culmination of the work begun by Sir Geoffrey Elton, who in an article written in 1970 began his campaign to "get at the man inside the plaster statue". Marius followed Elton in seeing More as a "failed priest", full of sexual guilt, with Freud taken as read. Alistair Fox also
drew on Elton to present More as a melancholic, driven by uncontrolled passions.' In particular, Marius attempts to radically revise the previous most extensive and scholarly biography of More, written by R. W. Chambers, and published in 1935. In the introduction to his own book, Marius is critical of Chambers, who "wrote in an irenic spirit about a Thomas More who gave his life rather than submit to a tyrant"—an observation that seems unexceptionable, still arguably the salient fact about More, and more to be trusted as a focal point for a biography than psychological speculation, a point about Marius's treatment to which we shall return. Chambers, says Marius, "wrote in the mood of liberal English schoolmasters who held all religions to be good as long as one did not become excessively serious about any of them." "Chambers had read everything, it seems, that had been written about More from the sixteenth century on, and he attacked all the attacks and defended all the defenses.

Whatever truth there is in what Marius says, a strident note takes over:

Finally, this cloying, unrelenting, often unthinking defense of More in every particular is irksome. Chambers, above religious dogma himself, wrote his entire book without giving any serious consideration to More's theology, his hatred of heretics, and his fear of hell. At times, as when Chambers justifies his snow-white estimate of More's character by quoting the praise of Jonathan Swift, he is simply silly. His unbearably chatty style condescends to serious readers, and those who approach Chambers's book today are likely to come to pray and stay to mock.

It is natural for any biographer to wish to distance himself from his predecessors, especially perhaps the most distinguished, but this reflects more the revisionist agenda than a judicious assessment of Chambers's limitations. Marius merely echoes G. R. Elton's view, expressed subsequently, and in similar terms, in Elton's review of Marius's book in the *New York Review of Books*. Elton there refers to "Chambers's exercise of pious naivete, still loudly praised by More
worshipers, the work of a man of letters with a limited sense of history and less experience as a biographer." Both Marius and Elton prefer an *ad hominem* attack to a fair appraisal, in what appears to be an attempt to make the earlier work a dead letter.

In fact, Chambers is still an engaging read, and one may find much in his approach that is still useful and stimulating, even putting aside his acceptance on face value of More's heroism. The storm clouds of Europe in the nineteen thirties loom over the book, and part of Chambers motivation is to see More within the wider currents of the inheritance of Christendom, and the manifestations of the modern Western crisis that were taking on such terrible forms in Chambers' own time. He rightly sees More in a tradition of conservative, reforming Christian thought that includes the poet William Langland before him, and the political philosopher Edmund Burke after him. The connection with Jonathan Swift is not, in general, "merely silly," given that Swift shared More's Christian humanism, his ironic spirit, his defense of Revelation against the spirit of his age-apart from Swift's high regard for More's stand against tyranny. More and Swift are kindred spirits who usefully illuminate each other. In Chambers' work we can also see the influence of the English Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, as well as that of G. K. Chesterton, both of whom examined early twentieth century upheavals in the light of the history and the crises of Christendom and modernity. Chambers is critical of the Whig interpretation of history and he has a strong sense that the legacy of the Middle Ages is disappearing to make way for something much less humane. He is methodical, scholarly, and has a sensitive ear for integrating and balancing More's writings, what others wrote about him, and the wider historical and cultural context. In this sense, Chambers has a depth that Marius, for all his information, lacks. In some respects, Chambers may be seen to be in sympathy with treatments of More that have appeared subsequent to that of Marius, whose limitations may be more important than are those of Chambers.

Where sometimes More's biographers are seen as unreliable because they are his coreligionists, Marius criticizes Chambers for
being "above religious dogma". However, it could be said that Chambers takes More's beliefs more seriously than does Marius, since he prefers to think that More is driven essentially by psychological impulses rather than religious ones. It seems unfair, moreover, to say that a biographer is unreliable because he has a different religious position than More, an observation that would tend to undermine Marius's own standing, too. To suggest also that admiration for More tends to disqualify a putative biographer necessarily limits the field to those who are hostile or who possess a facile, neutral objectivity. Whatever the case, Marius sets himself against those who admire More in order to bolster the appearance of impartiality, and thus to reinforce his authority:

The present book tries to find the More of history buried under the pyramid of praise heaped over his name in recent times. It is an effort to discover the living being behind the glorified mummy wrapped in gold and embalmed with adulation that has become a museum piece rather than a man.  

This may simply be an ornate way of announcing the intention to reveal the seamy side, in the way of so much anti-heroic contemporary biography. But given a dearth of blackening evidence in the case of Thomas More, the darkness has to be suggested by a paradigm of the expiation of sexual guilt: this is, in essence, Marius's agenda, something that ultimately limits his work, even as it enables him to write the book he wants to write.

Marius's paradigm submerges religious principle in a welter of psychological tensions. More, says Marius, "never overcame his longing for the unambitious, remote life of the cloistered monk he might have been, the monk he always thought he should have been." This preternatural divination on the part of Marius leads to a very schematic treatment:

For those who know More's life best, the most puzzling thing about him is that he did not become a priest or perhaps a monk, devoting all his days to the quest for salvation. The testimony
of Erasmus, seconded by Roper and confirmed by the rigorous spirit of his voluminous and vehement religious works, makes it clear that More considered a religious vocation and turned back. He gave it up because he wanted a wife.  

Upon this simplistic conclusion, Marius erects "the ruling drama of [More's] life", the expiation of guilt for sexual weakness, a frustration that exploded in his fury against heretics: "This fury was not a bizarre lapse in an otherwise noble character; it was almost the essence of the man." What is surprising is that someone so steeped in More's writings, as this editor of the Yale works indeed was, should come to a view that is so opposed to the broad current of More's readership. But perhaps he gives us a clue in this observation:

"For More the insufficiency and the detachment worked together to create the irony that became the blade of his wit-a wit that makes it difficult for a biographer, who cannot always tell when More speaks seriously and when not."

Marius lacks an imaginative sympathy with More as much in his inability to penetrate his irony, as in his refusal to accept More's Christian martyrdom in the sense that More undoubtedly understood it.

Marius's Freudian approach to a man motivated by strong religious conviction has its predecessors. In the preface to his *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement* (1933), Christopher Dawson mentions *Oxford Apostles*, an earlier study of the Movement by Geoffrey Faber, and criticizes it thus:

[Faber] bases his history of the Movement on his interpretation of the character of its leaders and he bases this interpretation not on their own theological and moral conceptions but on the categories of modern psychology. The result of this psychological analysis of the Oxford Movement is to produce a strange reversal of the traditional values. Seen through
Freudian spectacles the severe moralism of the Tractarian ethos dissolved into an orgy of morbid emotionalism. The history of the Oxford Movement becomes an essay in sexual psychopathy. Newman appears not as one of the greatest of English religious thinkers but as an example of the unfortunate results of infantile repression, and his spiritual development is not the result of his religious principles; on the contrary the latter are the unconscious instruments of a maimed personality struggling to attain equilibrium without abandoning "the citadel where his infantile self lay entrenched." In the same way Froude and Pusey represent different types of psychic perversion while the smaller fry are summarily dismissed as Newman's "escort of hermaphrodites." 

This sounds similar to the Marius approach, albeit in a cruder form, and Dawson neatly encapsulates its shortcomings: "A psychology which ignores religious values must inevitably misinterpret the behaviour of men whose whole lives are ruled by religious motives." This is the limitation of the Freudian undercurrent in Marius's work, which can emerge explicitly: "The Freudians tell us that such a father may create in his son-especially in the eldest son-an overpowering superego, a force that drives the young man to set impossible goals for himself and torments him afterwards when he cannot achieve them." It is a form of the incipient determinism that More opposed so strenuously in his own time, not because he was afraid of it, but because he believed that it limits the larger sense of the human that inheres in the Faith that he defended.

More's reaction to the Protestant reformers was as much a defense of Christian humanism as it was a defense of the settled order of Christendom, of which Christian humanism was the most recent authentic development. In attempting to integrate the Gospel with the literature of Greece and Rome, it may be distinguished from classical humanism on the one hand, and secular humanism on the other. Although the one predates Christian humanism, and the other arose subsequent to it, the distinction is philosophical rather
than merely historical. An important part of the humanist project of More's time was the attempt to integrate humane letters into the university curriculum, to complement the divinity of Scripture and the Church Fathers; there was much debate at Oxford over the value of studying Greek, something More supported strongly. The knowledge of man gained from these humane (or profane) letters had an evangelical purpose; the better man was understood as man, the better he could be taught sacred truths. Furthermore, the fullest development of man's nature, the ideal of the Roman humanists, was believed to be consistent with God's purposes, both for individual souls, and for the community as a whole. The Christian (or Catholic) humanists, particularly Thomas More, occupied a middle way between respect for the inheritance of medieval Catholicism, and interest in the broadening understanding of the moral nature of man, and are thus distinct from the secularizing and rationalizing tendency in Renaissance humanism that gave birth to modernity.

Thomas More can also be seen in the context of a distinct English humanism that had a particular moral direction, as in Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor*, and Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster*. Further, the integration of humane letters into Christian learning helped to turn the rarefied and arid speculations of scholasticism towards practical moral ends. The four books reviewed here all, to a greater or lesser extent, suggest that this Christian humanism, rather than Freudian psychology, is the proper context in which to see the real Thomas More, and to understand his motivations.

John Guy, Professor of Modern History at the University of St. Andrews, gives us a very full and up-to-date historiographical study of the literature on Thomas More (although he makes no mention of Wegemer and his very important book). His brief is outlined by the terms of the series in which the book appears: "The volumes in the Reputations series examine the reputations of some of history's most conspicuous, powerful and influential individuals, considering a range of representations, some of striking incompatibility."(vii) Such an approach could produce inconclusiveness, and there is something a little depressing in Guy's prefatory comment, "Now
that I have finished this book, I no longer believe that a truly historical biography of Thomas More can be written."(xi) There is simply not enough to go on, he very reasonably says. However, this should not give us the idea that More studies ultimately fail to come up to the strict standards of history, narrowly or broadly conceived; rather, it suggests that More's undoubted powerful and continuing presence in our culture cannot be explained through standard historical methods of inquiry. It is true that the kind of biography of More that Guy means has not yet appeared, but this does not preclude the imaginative writer, such as Peter Ackroyd, working sympathetically upon an extensive knowledge of the works, from producing valuable biography, however much this is not "historical". Finally, Guy's book may give us the sense that the historical approach alone is itself too limited a tool with which we can come to know Thomas More.

This is far from being a reductive book, however, even if it does emphasize what we do not know, and cannot know, about More. Guy addresses head on the central questions that More poses biographer and student alike. Is there an historical Thomas More? How significant was his choice between the active and the contemplative life? Was he a reluctant courtier? How factual is the picture of More as a devoted family man? To what extent can he be seen as a social reformer, a heresy hunter, a law reformer, a successful politician? To what degree did he acquiesce in or resist Henry VIII's reforms? What did he mean by "conscience"? In this last question, we come to the theme that is seen as being of crucial importance for our understanding of More, returning conscience to a central place in our understanding of him, rather than seeing his motives in terms of putative psychosexual tensions, the evidence for which, as Guy shows persuasively, is practically non-existent.

In the course of a wide-ranging review of More scholarship, Guy gives the revisionists short shrift, providing a thorough overview of More studies as they were rekindled in the late 1970s, through a series of international conferences to mark the 500th anniversary of More's birth:
According to these critiques, More's decision to leave the Charterhouse in favor of marriage was `sudden' and 'unex-
pected', a line of argument that is deployed to support the inference that he was a `failed' candidate for the priesthood `tormented' by his sexuality. The proponents of this thesis, Sir Geoffrey Elton and Richard Marius, seek to inscribe More's life and public career within a paradigm of sin and redemption. (32)

This view is "vigorously contested" by the Amici Thomae Mori (the "Friends of Thomas More" based in Angers, France) and the contributors to Moreana (the journal dedicated to More's life and influence) and, concludes Guy, "right is likely to be on their side." (32) Guy's very telling undermining of Elton consists in his, first, pointing out that, "Roper, the most authoritative of the earliest biographers, did not claim that More was `testing a vocation' for the priesthood." Instead, the idea came from Nicholas Harpsfield, More's second biographer, who built on Roper's account, adding details from sources within the More family. But,

It turns out that Harpsfield's "apparent conjectures" were not, after all, based on his "sources" in the More circle. They derived from a literalist reading of the vignette of More which Erasmus had sent to Ulrich von Hutten in July 1519. (32)

In addition to noting the playful irony in Erasmus's public letter, and the simply conventional character of the "merry jest" about one who rather chose to be a "chaste husband than a lewd priest", Guy also points to Erasmus's making use of More for his own didactic and idealizing purposes, setting before his readers "a model of decorum" that demonstrated Erasmus's own humanist agenda, rather than a true picture of Thomas More. Harpsfield read Erasmus literally, concludes Guy, and Elton and Marius, "[i]n their concern to vindicate their interpretation of More's sexual `guilt' and `perturbation'...overlook the degree to which Harpsfield's `story' is unsupported." (33) As Guy observes, it is not clear at all whether
More lived in the Charterhouse or nearby it; Peter Ackroyd, for instance, inclines strongly to the latter view.

Thomas Stapleton, the third of More's three early biographers, is the main source for the revisionists' idea of sexuality frustrating his ambitions for the religious life, but Guy makes clear that he also merely amplified Harpsfield, and actually does not even mention the Charterhouse, eccentrically suggesting that More wanted to become a Franciscan. Marius cites Stapleton with approbation, even though Stapleton's authority has no independent corroboration. Moreover, while there is no doubt that More, as Stapleton says, wore a hair shirt, more has been made of this fact, as evidence of a felt need to subdue sexual desire, than is reasonable. In addition, there is no evidence that More wore the shirt "even as a youth," except Stapleton's assertion, but it seems to have been enough for Elton's imagination, which he projected onto More. Guy's interpretation of the hair shirt is rather more restrained and judicious; it is also percipient:

To wear a hair shirt, or to scourge oneself, was regarded by the Church as a discipline and an atonement for sin. All this is far removed from the secular norms of today, but the conclusion is self-evident. More's hair shirt is a testimony to his religious faith. To this extent, Elton is correct. But it is not by itself "evidence" that More in the Charterhouse had "not been able to follow the call to abandon the flesh" or that he was some sort of "sex maniac" or deviant. (35-6)

The "secular norms of today", riddled as they are with half-baked, pseudo-Freudian notions of repression, no doubt see the corporal mortification of the flesh as a form of unhealthy sadomasochism. If More biography has at times suffered from being too closely allied with a Catholic devotional approach, it is not perhaps too strong to say that, more recently, it has suffered in an equal and opposite way from those who are unsympathetic to, or misunderstanding of, More's religion. Guy also suggests, importantly, that the revisionists underestimate "the humanist emphasis on philosophy": 
For Grocyn and Colet, the balance had tilted in favor of "contemplation". For More the lure in the end was always "action". The significance of the Charterhouse years is likely to be that More spent his time trying to understand the proper relationship between philosophy and public life. (38)

If there are any tensions germane to the question of More's choice of the law over the Church, they are more likely to have been, saliently, philosophical than sexual.

Guy also criticizes the revisionists' claim that More's reluctance to enter royal service was a "sham", and convincingly undermines Elton's suggestions of More's dishonesty towards Erasmus on the matter. Elton implied, on the basis of his researches in public records, that More lied to Erasmus about the date of his entering the royal service. Elton's evidence for More entering the king's service much earlier than he said he did to Erasmus relies on the warrant for More's councillor's fee for £100. But, Guy says,

Elton's case collapses when it is realized that grants or annuities might sometimes be back-dated or payments made in advance. His seemingly invincible thesis is built on sand. He studies the warrant for More's fee in isolation, whereas a systematic investigation would have shown that the procedure was more nuanced than it seemed. (51)

Guy's point is especially important because, "Elton's claim almost certainly paved the way for subsequent assertions by Richard Marius that More `distorted', `twisted' or suppressed evidence at least twice in his career." (49) Guy in the process reinforces Roper as a trustworthy authority, and diminishes the significance of Erasmus, who was not as intimately acquainted with More's family as we sometimes suppose:

When he wrote to Hutten, [Erasmus] had not met More's family for almost a decade. And he never set foot in Chelsea. More did not buy his estate there until 1524. (5)
Again, there can be no doubt of some tensions involved as More joined the royal service, and as we see played out in the first book of *Utopia*, but Guy sees no great crisis in More's movement closer to court:

More's legal and commercial work in London, Bruges and Calais between 1510 and 1517 was so extensive, and so closely linked to the interests of the Crown and State, that if it was not at least a limited form of commitment to a career in politics, what was? At a minimum, More's transition from a legal and City career to a political one was seamless. (58)

Elton's attempts to present More as succumbing to worldly temptation, as to sexual satisfaction, are again shown to be tendentious rather than significant. This radical reassessment of the grounds of the revisionists' claims is perhaps the most important thrust of Guy's book, and allows us to see more clearly the place of moral philosophy at the heart of More's outlook.

It is in this spirit that Guy interprets *Utopia*. As he demonstrates, significant analysis of and disquisition upon this classic humanist text did not arise until the middle of the twentieth century. Before the Yale edition of the 1960s, the prevailing view, most fully amplified by R. W. Chambers, was to see *Utopia* as an idyllic expression of what human beings could achieve through unaided reason, and thus to "prick the conscience" of Christian Europe. J. H. Hexter challenged the idyllic interpretation by positing an idealistic one: *Utopia* is a radical suggestion of what should actually obtain in reality, an echo of the early twentieth century Marxist view that More was a proto-communist. Utopia is a "parallel society" to Christian Europe, and actually more genuinely Christian than Europe. But,

As Quentin Skinner and Brendan Bradshaw have commented (at different times and in different ways), a close reading of Book II shows that Hythlodaeus had all along distanced himself from the principle of the moral code of the Utopians which prescribed "pleasure" and "happiness" to them as "the end of
their being".... If, therefore, Utopia represents More's "ideal" of true Christianity, it follows that he did not consider Scripture, the sacraments or knowledge of Christ himself to be essential to a truly Christian existence. This is patently absurd.(98)

Further to Chambers and Hexter is "Dermot Fenlon's hypothesis that More's purpose is to show that the humanist programme is misdirected":

More crafts *Utopia* to demonstrate that the gap between the self-interested "egoism" of Book I, and the philosophical "altruism" of Book II on which the humanist project must rely, is unbridgeable. Utopia, according to Fenlon, is the pattern of an "ideal" humanist society, but it is one that More exposes as an "illusion".(99)

Quentin Skinner has also considered *Utopia* as a humanist critique of humanism. Book II is the only possible response to the social evils of Book I, but humanists are not inclined to go that far, so there are contradictions within the humanist project. Finally, Skinner inclines to Hexter's view of Utopia as an ideal society, but Brendan Bradshaw has critiqued this view to provide a fourth distinct approach. This is to see the lesson of *Utopia* as being that

the possibility of progress resides neither in the tradition of "moral absolutism" nor in the commitment of the politician to "civic duty". It will emerge from "a constructive and continuing dialogue between the two".(101)

It is this view that Guy finds persuasive:

Of the latest interpretations, the view that *Utopia* seeks to reconcile the rival philosophies of Plato and Cicero is highly attractive. If this reading is correct, More made the realization of Plato's ideal the mission of the Ciceronian politician.(102)
Such recent interpretations suggest, therefore, that the real temptation that More had to avoid was not marriage but, on the contrary, the life of contemplation that would have been a denial of his basic Ciceronian philosophical position. This account of More's motivations is, as Guy shows, more convincing than tendentious psychological guesswork. Thus, the debate about More's motivations has returned to the question of conscience.

Guy's discussion of what conscience meant for More during his imprisonment and trial places it in the context of More's understanding of law. Conscience is part of a complex and integrated network of consistent and converging principles:

The king cannot be Supreme Head of the Church. Human positive law, which included common law and parliamentary statutes, had to be consistent with God's law and the law of reason. The law of reason conformed to God's law and the law of nature, and was recognized by jurists as moral or fundamental law. The theory had been comprehensively expounded in the works of St Thomas Aquinas. When human law went against reason, it was void, and an unreasonable Act of Parliament was void.(195-6)

Conscience and consensus converge in More's moral understanding to provide an unquestionable authority:

[At his trial, More's motion in arrest of judgment] was a defense of an individual's right to frame his or her own "conscience", but the operative framework was not that of individual opinion. Quite the reverse. The Church was never to be judged by such opinions. The view that individuals could read the Bible and make judgments about religious doctrine and the Church was a Protestant position. Catholic "conscience" was to be anchored to the "consensus" or common faith of Christendom, whether this was "explicit" in the decrees of the General Council of the Church or "implicit" in the "general faith grown by the working of God universally through all Christian nations."

(199-200)
Guy also suggests that, in the Tower, More's commitment to the Pope "probably hardened. There was nowhere else to go":

By extrapolation, we might affirm that he died for the Pope; but he was a lukewarm papalist. To ignore these nuances is to obliterate the significance of his view of the authority of the General Council of the Church, the cornerstone of his theory of "consensus", which is, in turn, the key to his definition of "conscience". (204)

The primacy of Peter was finally an occasional, rather than a causative dimension of More's martyrdom, unlike that of the ardent papalist, John Fisher.

Guy is a sensible, clear-eyed and robust commentator on the current state of More studies, and the reader will be hard put to cite a scholarly treatment that it is more balanced without being arid, or more sympathetic without being undiscriminating. This book is a highly successful exercise in ground-clearing, and will be found an immensely useful starting point for any assessment of the secondary material, from the earliest biographies onwards. On some historical matters he points to the inconclusiveness of the evidence. There is no evidence, Guy claims, that More, as Lord Chancellor, was a great reformer of the law; Wolsey was more significant in this respect, and More certainly continued Wolsey's direction in assuring equity in the practice of the common-law judges. In attacking heresy, he was certainly promoting the king's agenda, rather than any private crusade, and there is no evidence for the "furious and cruel zeal" attributed to him by the early Protestant apologists and historians, and implied by Richard Marius. In considering whether More can be called a failure as a politician, Guy exculpates More from Lord Acton's charge that he evaded his moral and political responsibilities as Lord Chancellor, and did not stand up for his beliefs soon enough, but he admits that the case of More demonstrates the force of Machiavelli's advice to either avoid princes altogether, or to attach oneself to one closely. Such a choice was impossible, however, for More, as for anyone, perhaps, with a conscience that urges the
promotion of the common good in the real world where morality exists.

Alvaro de Silva, professor of theology at Thomas More College, Merrimack, NH, in the introduction to his edition of More's last letters, quotes John Henry Newman as saying, "A man's life lies in his letters.... Biographers varnish; they assign motives; they palliate or defend.-" (4) De Silva presents to us More's last letters, from those to Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII in February 1534, to the last words to his daughter, Margaret Roper, on the eve of his execution in July 1535. There are twenty-four letters in all, and materials that helpfully support the understanding of the modern reader. Unusual words are glossed at the foot of the page, and a substantial commentary of longer notes discusses the historical background, the characters mentioned, and recondite theological or ecclesiastical matters. There is a useful general glossary, an extensive bibliography, and a stimulating introduction-all of which successfully supports the editor's intention of reaching a wide readership, something of which More would have surely approved.

De Silva's introduction, entitled "Good Company", places More in his historical and literary context. We are given a few biographical details leading up to his imprisonment and fourteen-month captivity, and comparisons are suggested with the prison literature of the twentieth century, such as that of Solzhenitsyn and Bonhoeffer. In literary terms (as, we might suppose, in spiritual) this was More's most fruitful period:

More's "Tower Works" are not only a splendid example of the genre but also represent the height of his literary accomplishments. In spite of the physical and psychological conditions he endured, More did not abandon the craft he had cultivated for many years. Like most Renaissance writers, he wanted to be useful, and so, as helpless prisoner of his conscience, he wrote to strengthen himself, and then others.(8)

Not only these letters (those which survive of what must have been many more) but also the Dialogue of Comfort and the De Tristitia
Christi attest favorably to De Silva's judgment, and serve to emphasize Gerard Wegemer's point, in *Thomas More on Statesmanship*, about the importance of literature to More the Christian humanist. If the use of humane letters is to teach man through a knowledge of man, then this is as true for the self as for others. In these letters, we see Thomas More "making his soul" in a literary form that integrates the public and the private. This is a different form than the polemic used against the Protestant reformers, but there is a similar underlying humanist purpose, in the use of literature to incarnate truth in the language of men. More is a Christian humanist, somewhere between Luther and Erasmus, in a balance that enabled him to criticize, in *Utopia*, the humanist project—a project, however, he never rejected. As De Silva says:

More is, from beginning to end, from the Island of Utopia to the Tower of London, ever the dedicated humanist. Not to see this, is, I think, to misunderstand him and to make him a fanatic, a reactionary, and a humanist writer who completely lost his emotional control and whose voluminous polemical writings should be dismissed not only as boring but insane. Nothing can be further from the truth.(7)

In support of this statement, De Silva cites Brendan Bradshaw who "argues for the coherence of Thomas More in this war of words: one million words in defense of his faith against new Protestant doctrines. More became a controversialist because he was a Christian humanist." (7)

We have seen, too, how a number of other oppositions converge in Thomas More, and are, in a way that can certainly be debated, either resolved or held in tension. He was medieval and modern, European and English, a stylist in Latin and in the vernacular, both contemplative and active. No doubt this was due in part to his peculiar position in history, straddling the medieval and the modern divide, but more so to his integrating mind and personality. Perhaps the most important resolution for us is that of the duality of the individual and the community, and the resolution centers upon
More's understanding of the word *conscience*. The most interesting part of De Silva's introduction lies in his discussion of what conscience meant to More—something quite different to, and more sophisticated than, what the word generally means in modernity:

The word *conscience* is conspicuous throughout the last letters, appearing a total of more than one hundred times, and more than forty times in a single letter (Letter 12 in this volume). Indeed, More's prison epistolary can be read as a lasting monument in praise of conscience. The spirit of modernity has always prided itself on being precisely such a monument, claiming, above all else, the freedom of the individual and his or her conscience, the so-called autonomy of the "I". But More knew of the possibility of a "fabrication of conscience", or what he refers to in another letter as "framing a conscience".(10)

De Silva alludes to Kierkegaard and Newman to show that conscience implies being alone with God, and therefore it finds a freedom not in autonomy, but in relationship:

Conscience (from Latin *con-scire, scire cum*) denotes a "certain knowledge that we have with another." The particle *cum* denotes "a being together, an accompanying"—"it signifies in union, in relation to, in common, together with". (11)

Although De Silva, in the context of More's Tower works, rightly places his emphasis on conscience as "the knowledge of Christ, the wisdom of Christ, the knowledge of oneself with Christ and in Christ"(11), this understanding of conscience goes also to the heart of More's understanding of the Church as a company in Christ. But as De Silva does say,

[the Latin particle is also the key to fully understanding two other words intentionally and insistently present in his last writings in the Tower, *comfort (cum+fortitudo)* and company (cum+panis).](11)
In his period of captivity, More was very aware of finding strength and sustenance from being together with the saints who had suffered before him. As De Silva puts it:

Modernity may have little use for the sense of eternity, or for what Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead", but for More it was undoubtedly a great source of moral strength, consolation, and joy. His Utopians believed that "the dead move about among the living and are witnesses of their words and deeds", and therefore the living "go about their business with more confidence because of reliance on such protection". (15)

It is an illustration that quite pointedly reminds us that Utopia was not entirely removed from More's idea of the good society, however much it falls short.

These letters allow De Silva to contrast More with Machiavelli, a contrast brought out by two telling quotations from the Italian:

"I love my city more than my own soul," wrote Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori. In this brutal assertion, transcendence has been blotted out, and the tragic consequences are better known to us than to Machiavelli. (19)

Niccolo Machiavelli had a very different view of things when he wrote, "And of conscience we should not take account because where there is, as in us, the fear of hunger and prison, that of hell neither can nor should find room." (14)

The civic humanism of More was of course quite different from that of Machiavelli, who has hitherto found a more useful place in modernity. However, De Silva emphasizes the point that More has as much a claim to be considered a political thinker, and one in whom there is matter with which to counter Machiavelli's limitations. For More can also speak to us in modern accents, as these letters show; there is all the modern concern with self, in a literary art of self-fashioning. More in prison, however, is not confined in solipsism,
but rather embodied that quality which resolved Cicero's paradox: *numquam se minus otiosum esse quam cum otiosus, nec minus solum quam cum Bolus esset.*

De Silva's book, with its ruminative, devotional, and well-informed introduction, gives us the refined More, and More at his finest. Despite a certain homage to the inescapable pattern of heroic virtue that More's final months present, the revisionists would have us see him as having painted himself into a corner, in a kind of political failure that had fortuitously released him from others and given him the monkish cell he had always wanted. As Richard Marius puts it:

It is perhaps not too much to speculate that once he had refused the oath and been confined to the Tower, More became locked in an inner world of his own, a world where he atoned for his early decision to marry and to forsake priesthood, a world where he endured on earth part of the purgatory that a secular man like himself must expect after death, a world where private struggle so filled his being that he had no room for the struggle and fate of others who, now, he thought, in the intense psychic freedom from care given him by his captivity, could be left to God.'

As Guy has shown, this "paradigm of sin and atonement" for marriage does not hold water, and the close attention to the last letters that we receive with De Silva suggests that, far from retreating into himself, More was moving into another company, or communion, that did not exclude anyone, not friends, family or (ultimately, he prayed) even foes.

More's pattern of heroic virtue, then, endures. But what of his political philosophy? In *Thomas More on Statesmanship,* Gerard Wegemer, associate professor of literature at the University of Dallas, considers the importance of More's life and works as an exercise in practical politics—the art of statesmanship. He emphasizes the place in More's thought of the classics (of Plato and Cicero especially), the Bible, the Fathers, and the English common law.
More's civic humanism thus constitutes a powerful "alternative to Machiavelli's absolutist prince, to Hobbes's institutional substitute for virtue, and to later social contract theorists". Wegemer resists some recent studies of More that see, in *Utopia*, a proto-machiavellian separation of morality and politics, and the psycho-historical approach that sees in More's personality a putative repressed sexuality of "unconscious drives, not principled choice" determining More's thoughts and actions. Marius's and Fox's "melancholy man" is seen as groundless, the evidence being rather for More as a Democritus, the laughing philosopher. Wegemer's emphasis is placed firmly on "law and government, the very activities that filled most of his waking hours", and on the central place of literature in More's humanist thought, as the "primary civilizing force" that develops conscience and hence political justice. If Guy's book is ground-clearing, Wegemer's is ground-breaking in establishing an extensive study of More's political thought.

In the first part of the book, Wegemer considers "More's Understanding of the Statesman's Work". He shows that the basis of More's political, as of his moral, outlook is a firm adherence to the doctrine of free will, "the very property that Luther and his followers denied". Men have this intrinsic freedom from their creator, in whose image they are made, and they are, by virtue of their reason, capable of self-rule. The capacity of reason to rule free men is, however, mitigated by pride, the basis of folly. Wegemer illustrates More's attention to both pride and folly by wide reference to the works, including the poetry, and the *History of King Richard III*; both include criticisms of kingship, and Wegemer suggests an essentially republican understanding in More, of political authority as deriving from the people, or existing rather in a certain mutuality in the exercise of authority between ruler and subject. (More actually preferred the words "citizens" or "people" to "subjects".) More considered that Parliament was "the supreme and highest authority in England", and obedience to law was required of everyone, including the king. For More the common lawyer, law itself was part of the network of customs and traditions that constituted the conscience of the nation, a macrocosmic reflection of the conscience possessed by every man:
Conscience, then, provides the metaphysical foundation and the ultimate binding force of law, arising from the very structure of one's being.... The genuine statesman, therefore, is the one who humbly recognizes this order, and binds himself to administer its laws....(73)

In the second part of his book, Wegemer looks at More's place in the humanist project of placing literature at the center of the development of political conscience. More precisely, this was a recognition that poetry nurtures prudence:

More considered the study of good literature to be an important part of the statesman's education in prudence- i.e., in that ability to see and make judgments in light of what actually exists without the distortions that often arise from one's own desires or expectations.(77)

It is for this reason, says Wegemer, that "Plato makes epistemology the central issue in his exploration of statesmanship", and More, as a poet himself, and especially in his Epigrammata, shows himself a remarkably "true-to-life" artist. Thus, Wegemer criticizes Alistair Fox's idea that More's writings represent a "rigidly dualistic" cast of mind which radically segregates the physical and the spiritual in Manichean fashion": the patterns of darkness and light that we see in the More corpus actually represent life, rather than a peculiar outlook in More. More sees the contradictions inherent in human life, and his use of irony is apposite:

For More as well as for Socrates, irony and dialectics are integral parts of the highest work proper to the soul, the work of perceiving the true and the good. This work of seeing requires thorough training in dialectics, and it requires that one bring to bear all of one's powers.(79)

Most importantly for the political dimension, literature develops in the statesman this quality of perception, and again Wegemer em-
phrases that this is a Platonic theme. Wegemer also points out wherein Lucian was so important to More, who translated his dialogues before embarking on his Utopia. Wegemer quotes More as saying of Lucian:

Refraining from the arrogant pronouncements of the philosophers as well as from the wanton wiles of the poets, he everywhere reprimands and censures, with very honest and at the same time entertaining wit, our human frailties.(84)

Pride is the great obstacle to seeing things as they really are, and the dialectical element in literature is essential, especially for the poet who must test his own opinions in a dialectical manner:

...the true work of reason begins by considering and contemplating varying images from different points of view, usually with the help of good conversation (the ordinary form of dialectics). Pride enters when one prematurely ends this process, arbitrarily taking one's own image or opinion of the good as the definitive one. Given the tendency in every person to fall into this trap, one can appreciate the difficult role of the great poet in making a literary work that will delight readers in ideas other than their own while simultaneously challenging their most deeply rooted prejudices, the ideas that stand in the way of seeing the truth.(89)

As Wegemer says, this is eminently true of Homer, the only poet to receive unqualified praise in More's epigrams, but it is also an observation we can apply to the art of More himself, and nowhere more so than in Utopia.

Having established the centrality of literature in More's political thought, Wegemer devotes three chapters to a discussion of Utopia, in a close textual reading that is lucid and convincing. He attends fruitfully to the literary qualities of the dialogue, especially the use of rhetorical devices in the development of character; what is important is not only what "Morus" and Hythloday say, but how they
behave, with a fusion of meaning in manners and ideas. Wegemer sees the *deracine* traveler Hythloday as representing the scholastic (or "academic"), and the integrated Morus as representing the civic humanist-two different kinds of philosophy:

Morus not only dramatizes the reason for his disagreement with Raphael, he also explains the rationale behind his own rhetorical and political approach: the philosopher cannot be a "scholastic", i.e., one who speaks in universals removed from particular persons and surroundings. Instead, the effective philosopher must know, adapt to, and protect his *scenam.* (94-5)

Wegemer places Hythloday in a Gnostic tradition that claims a special knowledge, "in sharp contrast to that knowledge universally accessible to all men which Socrates dialectically sought". (106)

In his analysis of Book I of *Utopia*, Wegemer draws out the Ciceronian allusions, emphasizing the central place of Cicero for the Renaissance humanists, and for a deeper understanding of *Utopia.* Wegemer's discussion is illuminating and well focused:

In summary, Cicero considered virtue as the best way of life, and the best state of the commonwealth as one based on friendship and good will, protected by law and fostered by rhetoric. (116)

This also convincingly expresses More's outlook. Wegemer also considers the question of private property, on which over the years so much shallow and speculative disquisition has been spent, and shows that far from being, except in the minds of the terrible simplifiers, contradictory ideas, that which is common depends upon the right sense of what is proper. As Cicero tells us in *De Officiis*, private property serves the commonwealth better than all things being held in common. This is the position of 'Morus' in Book I of the *Utopia*, and the views of More are coming to be seen as closer to his fictional *alter ego* than was once supposed.

In contrast, the views of Hythloday in Book II should be looked
at with more suspicion than has sometimes been the case. A Lenin might approve his ideas, but they are not More's, either in the fictional context of the dialogue, or in life, despite the attractions that the common life held for him. Wegemer's reading of *Utopia* is informed by a broad and deep understanding of More's whole corpus, and is consistent with the idea of More as a Catholic humanist rather than a proto-communist. Although this cannot be said to have ever been the general opinion, it can finally be laid to rest by an understanding of More's Ciceronian position, when his views on the positive value of private property are clear, despite their not being defended so explicitly (or ideologically) as are the Utopian practices in Hythloday's enthusiastic description. Through a new reading of Book II that skillfully contrasts Hythloday's Utopia with Augustine's *City of God* (upon which More lectured), Wegemer shows that More had serious reservations about a society in which the Christian revelation is absent. Revelation prevents natural law from turning into naturalism, always a partial philosophy in ignoring the fact that man is naturally religious, and possesses a hunger for something beyond himself. Although he emphasizes how far Utopia is from More's ideal commonwealth, Wegemer's conclusions upon it are finely balanced:

The overall effect of the Augustinian allusions that pervade book 2 of Utopia is to cause one to question Raphael's credibility and motivation in telling the tale he presents.... Nevertheless, many aspects of Raphael's ideal republic deserve praise and even implementation.... Just as Cardinal Morton discriminately adopts certain suggestions of Raphael, so will the discriminate reader of Utopia, and once the reader begins discriminating, he enters the dialectical game More has constructed. (149)

In the third part of this study, Wegemer turns to the life of Thomas More, showing how the limits of reason (evinced clearly in *Utopia*) lead to a need for law; how More saw the implications in the revolutionary theories of the Protestant reformers, and how he
advocated, in contrast, reform of a united Christendom, and defended free will. Again, we come to the issue of conscience in More, this time in the political context of the limits of government:

So important was conscience in More's understanding that he considered all education to be ordered to its formation and he maintained that allegiance to one's conscience takes precedence over allegiance to any state law. Conscience is a power of reason that operates in every individual, even the most hardened tyrant...and the most embittered traitor.... So powerful is it that it caused Richard III at the height of his power to awake screaming at night, and it brought Judas such distress that he hanged himself after achieving all he had so carefully planned. Because conscience is the faculty by which fundamental issues of good and evil are manifest to all human beings, even the most corrupt, More considered it to be the metaphysical foundation for law and justice.(183-4)

This understanding of conscience was at the basis of his clash with the King insofar as it manifested itself in different views of the nature of civil authority:

More saw the power of the king and his ministers as coming from God through the people, while Henry saw his power coming from God through the divine authority of the papacy-up until 1529. To understand this difference is to understand why Henry defended the papacy so strongly during the early part of his reign, even over More's objections.(187)

The question of princely absolutism is, at bottom, a philosophical one about the nature of conscience, and hence of human beings. Human beings (and not only the English blessed with an explicit body of common law that bears witness to the fact of natural law) are not suited by nature to absolutism. None the less, More's opposition to absolutism was directly derived from his training as an English common-lawyer:
Both Henry and Wolsey were despotic at heart and greatly disliked Parliament. More, however, as we have seen, considered Parliament not only a good and necessary check to centralized power, but a form of government potentially superior to monarchy. Dramatized in the encounter with Wolsey was the old struggle between independent-minded citizens jealous of self-rule on one side and monarchical or ecclesiastical despots on the other. This drama was nothing new in England. But one must appreciate that More always considered himself part of those independent-minded Englishmen, even when serving as a royal counselor. (188-9)

In drawing out this theme of the limitations of government, Wegemer points to an important way in which More's political thought maybe fruitfully brought to bear on our present debates of the same question.

This book adds considerable weight to the view of More as an unusually integrated personality, in whom oppositions meet and find resolution. It was once typical to see him as a man of contradictions, as was Cicero, and—more appositely—perhaps as was Edmund Burke. These apparent contradictions have prevented him, as they have prevented Burke, from being seen as a major political thinker, but Thomas More on Statesmanship shows a consistency of mind; More changed his front but not his principles; and in a time when, as in every time, there are siren voices who would lead us onto the political rocks of split personalities whose "conscience" is left at home, More provides us with a literature that affirms the integration of the private and the public, the subject and the object; or, to put it another way, conscience and law, or governor and governed.

Wegemer aptly summarizes More's approach to statesmanship, thus:

To implement, interpret, and improve a nation's laws, the wise statesman must have a thorough knowledge of his nation's laws, traditions, and literature as well as a thorough knowledge of human nature. By knowing these well, he can draw upon the
nation's longest-standing experience and deepest consensus to help him govern with the people's consent. (212)

In this, as in his pattern of virtue, Wegemer shows that More remains a relevant voice today, and more relevant for his ideas than for embodying modern psychological obsessions.

Peter Ackroyd's biography inevitably invites comparisons with that of Richard Marius. Rather as Gerard Wegemer helps to free More from the reductive aspects of the Marius interpretation of dark, psycho-sexual motives, so does Ackroyd, by eschewing the psychological approach altogether. Ackroyd is an eminent novelist and biographer (his *T. S. Eliot* (1984) is unsurpassed as the best biography of the poet available) and it is as a writer about London-the setting for his novels such as *Hawksmoor* (1985), and biographies such as *Dickens* (1990)-that he turns to Thomas More, one of the greatest of Londoners.

Ackroyd's imaginative sense of persons, place and period, and a judicious, controlled sympathy for his subject, give to this biography a vividness and authority free of the "committed" approach that has always bedeviled lives of More. Ackroyd's life will not replace that of Marius in depth of scholarship and sense of the intellectual background (for example, on common law and natural law), but the reader may feel more trusting towards Ackroyd's grasp of character and atmosphere. Consider, for example, the following from Marius:

A thesis of this biography of Thomas More is that he was, until imprisonment at the last, a cruelly divided man, torn between the necessity of making his way in the secular world and the devout longing to simplify life and to prepare his soul for the eternal world to come. Henry VIII was also divided. He comes down to us as the worst tyrant ever to sit on the English throne. Yet he was all his life torn between his grandiose vision of a chivalric self and the inner reality, which was somewhat pathetic-the enduring, frightened child always longing for a firm hand that might lead his steps aright. 26
"Cruelly" seems to be a characteristic reflection of Marius's sense of the man and the period, as being both possessed by an inner violence waiting to break out in burning fury. More is "torn", but then so is Henry VIII. So, we might suppose, is Martin Luther, and perhaps Erasmus, and Tyndale. Perhaps everyone then was torn, in a period groaning in travail to give birth to modernity. The problem of seeing historical characters in terms of "divided self" psychology is that it is so easily and schematically applied to anyone, and thus fails to distinguish individual persons from a simplified view of human motivation. On the one hand, we may say, who is without inner tensions? On the other, we can observe that More's salient feature is his integrity, in all the ramifications of the word. How, then, is our understanding of him increased by seeing him as if he was not? It is not as if the facts, as John Guy shows, support Marius's thesis. It is this aspect of Marius's biography that, as we have seen, finally fails to satisfy.

Ackroyd accepts a certain duality in More without imposing a reductive scheme upon him, departing from the internalizing of this duality, and instead brings it out into the context of More's world:

[More] could combine ambition and penitence, success and spirituality, in equal measure. He could move easily through a society permeated with religious values and images; the faith of his nation was a social and political, as well as a spiritual, reality. His sense of transience, and recognition of eternity, could only be enhanced in a city which from the southern bank of the Thames looked like an island of church steeples. More kept in fine balance these complementary vistas—of the hollowness of the world and of the delight in game. From this awareness of duality (and perhaps the duality within his own nature) springs his wit, his irony and the persistent doubleness of his vision.

That is why it is wrong to assume any struggle or crisis over the nature of his vocation.(99)

In that last sentence, Ackroyd departs radically from the revisionists,
beginning with Elton. But as the preceding sentences show, Ackroyd's method of seeing the man within the perspectives of his own world (a world for which Marius has little apparent sympathy) is finally a more stimulating context than the psychological one, especially when it remains (as it does) biographic, rather than hagiographic, or iconographic.

Early on in his book, Marius recognizes that "[More] loved the city and served it well, and London formed his mind and heart." He does not, however, expand on this perception. Ackroyd knows London well, and is himself a significant exponent of its literature. The association, for instance, between Thomas More and Thomas Becket is not new, but it takes on an almost uncanny forcefulness when Ackroyd tells us:

Thomas Becket was still the great saint of the city, the martyr and subsequent worker of miracles. He had been born just twenty yards from More's own house in Milk Street, near the corner of Ironmonger Lane and Cheapside, and it is a striking coincidence that these two Catholic Londoners—both martyred and canonized—should have been, some centuries apart, almost next door neighbors.

This is the kind of correspondence that Ackroyd explores in his novels, and the suggestiveness of the fact given is reflective of the power of his contextual approach, and the imaginative re-creation of scene can give us some remarkable insights, as in the picture of the rhetorical exercises of More the schoolboy:

When we come to look at his open-air dialogues, of which *Utopia* is the most celebrated example, we should remember that his conduct of debate was exactly that which the schoolboys of St Anthony's practiced—something to be argued outdoors and in the public domain. There was no such thing as private truth.

In addition to an imaginative sympathy for place, Ackroyd also has
the ability to re-create the medieval outlook of which More was representative.

In this way, Ackroyd articulates with sharp clarity the importance for More of the authority of consensus, in which all men by virtue of conscience participate. Against the "elaborations of medieval logic", More held "two fundamental tenets which he maintained until the end of his life":

He refers on various occasions to the principles of *sensus communis* and *consuetudo*; he deployed them against the scholastics but he also used them against those who supported the supremacy of Henry VIII. *Sensus communis* may mean in its most obvious signification what we call "common sense", able to cut through the persiflage of the dialecticians, but in More's later writings it takes on the further emphasis of common or universal understanding, which in turn implies a shared and traditional inheritance of belief. It is significant, too, that in scholastic psychology *sensus communis* was the faculty through which instinct and memory were able to make random sense impressions cohere. It is one of the great metaphors of the age. *Consuetudo* is the Latin noun for custom or habit; it can be taken as a reproof to those scholastics who twist language beyond the range of its ordinary meaning but, again, in More's subsequent writings it acquires larger authority as the term denoting the body of inherited practice and behaviour. When at the close of his life More, faced with his accusers, declared that he would "conforme my consciens" only to "the generall Councell of Christendome", he was reinforcing the same general principle. It is impossible to over-emphasise the authority which custom and tradition exercised upon More; he was, in that sense (as in others) one of the last great exemplars of the medieval imagination.(43)

The imaginative Ackroyd is well able to respond to this quality of the "medieval imagination" in More, and shows us that it is through this quality that we must approach More, if we are to approach him at all.
Thus, in contrast to Marius' bleak view of the Middle Ages, Ackroyd presents the period as one of imaginative vitality, of color more than cruelty. For Marius, the medieval hagiographic context consists in the saints of "The Golden Legend, immaculate and invincible, those epicene creations of sterile and impossible virtue who so tantalized and corrupted the desperately romantic Middle Ages." Ackroyd, however, sees the saints in a more vital picture of an enduring medieval cityscape, through which world the young Thomas More walked:

Thomas More turned left and walked down the relatively wide thoroughfare of mud and cobbles towards Poultry and Threadneedle Street. On his left hand he passed St Laurence Lane and Ironmonger Lane, among stone buildings with figures placed in niches, gilded and painted signs, timbers decorated with carved fruits or flowers, painted walls and gables, roofs of red tile, wrought iron poles bearing lamps, piles of dung and chips from firewood which had been chopped in the street before being taken indoors. In St Laurence Lane there was a large inn for travelers, known as Blossoms Inn, and in Ironmonger Lane there was a small church named St Martin Pomary on account of the apple trees which had grown in the vicinity. (16 )

St Mary Magdalen, St Mary-le-Bow, St Mary Colechurch, St Thomas of Acre, the wonderfully named St Benet Fink: all were part of the young More's daily round, and in Ackroyd's telling, More's late Middle Ages were fecund rather than sterile. We can readily see how More's imagination was indelibly impressed by a culture in which the image was no less important than the word.

Ackroyd is a particularly accessible biographer, and having no axe to grind, is well able to conjure the character of his subject from the earth of his world. This is, certainly, popular biography, but Ackroyd is no mean scholar. He is habitually sure on the culture of medieval London, including the curiosities of its language. Marius discusses the philosophical background to More's legal studies in
much depth, and in a highly informative way. His grasp of detail, however, is not always convincing, especially when some elision seems to be offered. For example, Marius tells us:

About 1501 More finished the formal study of law and became an "utter barrister", a complete lawyer, we would say, and began his own practice.\(^{29}\)

Ackroyd explains the word rather differently:

After several years of this preparatory training.... he was then eligible for the rank of utter or outer barrister. In the customary phrase he was called "to the Bar"-he was no longer sitting "under the Bar" with the inner barristers.(57)

The \textit{arcana} of medieval legal practice become intriguing under Ackroyd's interested eye.

Ackroyd is also sensitive to More's irony. When he resigned the office of Chancellor, he told his family that they could descend to "Oxford fare" before they went "abegging together". On this comment, Marius observes heavily that, "We should note that he could imagine nothing but begging to be lower than Oxford fare," in what is taken to be an authoritative judgment on the condition of university catering in More's time. Ackroyd is more appreciative of the old joke, still beloved of scholars and schoolboys, about the inedibility of institutional food:

It is an affecting picture, but it may in part be ironically conceived. There was a convention for complaining about the hardships and difficulties of university education-literally a convention since in the teaching of the art of letter-writing, or \textit{ars dictamen}, there were `model' letters which provided standard rhetorical tropes for laments on the life of the student. (44)

This contrast between Marius and Ackroyd in the interpretation of conventional tropes recalls Marius's taking Erasmus's letter about
More choosing to be a "chaste husband" rather than a "lewd priest" on face value. More's irony is frequently at play in the most distressing situations, not merely to mitigate the pain, but also to readjust the perspective for the sake of the more enduring comfort that Alvaro de Silva has described.

Ackroyd's book might have been subtitled, "The Man and His World"; in a way, he accepts the remoteness of Thomas More, and approaches his shade through what can be known. Marius feels more strongly that he knows More, but the psychological perspectives by which he views his subject seem less "objective" now than they did, perhaps, when his book was written, already some twenty years ago.

Whether historical, philosophical, scholarly or controversial, Thomas More's works show a concern for "the best state of the commonwealth", that which was to be conserved, extended, defended or improved in European society. Despite the passage of time since More's death, and the vicissitudes of Western civilization in that time, his concerns may still be recognized as ones for all seasons: the problem of innovation versus traditional order; the distribution of authority in a balanced constitution set against the pressure of centralizing and absolutist power; the demands of community and the rights of private property; the use of positive law for coercive purposes at variance with common law and natural law; the subversion of the established rights of popular assemblies, and their misuse by the will to power; the limits of free speech and the responsibilities of conscience; the respectful use of our common language as opposed to the sophistical subversion of meaning. These were Thomas More's concerns, and they should be ours. More's mind was both medieval and modern, both scholastic and classical. We see the influence of Aquinas (of course) and Aristotle, Augustine and Plato, Cicero, Thucydides, Lucian and Sallust. But he was, we should remember, primarily a common lawyer, and from his legal training in the Inns of Court, he would have been familiar with the world described by Sir John Fortescue in *De laudibus legum anglicae* (c.1470), and was probably familiar with the work itself. At the Inns of Court, More would have received an abiding sense of the
importance of natural law in English common law. He was, we can admit, strongly drawn to detachment from the world. However, he chose the road of engagement rather than withdrawal, the practice of law rather than the contemplation of the divine. The reason given that he chose "to marry rather than burn" is not so persuasive as is seeing his decision in the context of the reason for which he disagrees with Hythloday in Book I of *Utopia*: the Ciceronian ideal of an engaged, practical virtue.

Fortescue will have given More a high idea of the common law, as a source of English liberty, and a means for the diffusion of justice and equity through the commonwealth. Common law gave customary "determinations" of the natural law, the belief that all men are endowed with moral reason, and the ability to perceive what is just. It underpins the jury system, although Thomas More did not believe that juries could be trusted without judges. However, he did not trust simply to individuals either, no matter how elevated and honorable their position in the realm. Neither popes without councils, nor kings without parliaments, nor judges without courts, could be depended upon to determine rightly either spiritual or temporal law. More believed in the free play of rational discourse within properly constituted assemblies, as for instance in *Utopia*, but such discourse needed to have parameters set and terms informed by authority—that is, judges spiritual or temporal. Authority, as the context of order, and order as the context of happiness, depended on this careful balance of individual and community, neither of which can properly exist without the other. Another principle that More will have taken from Fortescue was that kings were bound by the law, and indeed did not make law themselves, but rather existed to uphold and defend it. The limits of kingship (or central executive power, as we might call it) and the claims of reason, or natural law, provide an important thread in More's life and works, and in his time we see the claims of absolutism growing.

Unlike Luther, More did not put his faith in princes. According to William Roper, he advised Henry VIII not to overstate the power of the papacy when he was compiling his book asserting, against Luther, the seven sacraments of the Church:
I must put your Highness in remembrance of one thing, and that is this. The Pope, as Your Grace knoweth, is a Prince as you are, and in league with all the other Christian Princes. It may hereafter so fall out that Your Grace and he may vary upon some points of the league, whereupon may grow breach of amity and war between you both. I think it best, therefore, that that place be amended, and his authority more slenderly touched.

More sensed early on the danger of arbitrary power, particularly to himself, saying that his head was not worth as much to Henry VIII as a field of France. His own father, Judge John More, had been imprisoned by Henry's father on a trumped-up charge, until he paid a fine of hundreds of pounds. Thomas More's first action as a member of Parliament had been to oppose levels of taxation proposed by Henry VII, and he wrote lines critical of the dead king on the accession of his son. More's greatest work, apart from *Utopia*, was written against another king, Richard III, and creates substantially the picture of the tyrant that Shakespeare was to inherit and pass on so memorably. The *History of King Richard III* has been seen as propaganda intended to curry favor with the Tudor establishment, but the work was not written until after Henry VII died, and was not published at all in More's lifetime. The *History is* a vituperative portrait in the manner of Thucydides, an exercise in the moral imagination. Richard is a machiavellian prince who will use any means to secure his ends, and his means are to dissemble, to cultivate a separation within himself of appearance and reality. More was a lover of irony, and used it in its sense of play throughout his works, to reveal rather than conceal. In Richard, however, irony in its more pernicious sense of dissimulation is seen as an attack on meaning itself. Richard enacts, in the dramatic scheme of the *History*, a pretended virtue, while at the same time performing vicious actions. His treatment of Shore's adulterous wife, for instance, draws More's revealing irony:

... in conclusion when no color could fasten upon these matters,
then he laid heinously to her charge that thing which herself could not deny, that all the world wist was true, and that nonetheless every man laughed at to hear it then so suddenly, so highly, taken: that she was nought of her body. And for this (as a goodly continent prince, clean and faultless of himself, sent out of heaven into this vicious world for the amendment of men's manners) he caused the Bishop of London to put her to open penance, going before the cross in procession upon a Sunday with a taper in her hand.  

To cultivate, as the machiavel does, a separation of meaning between appearance and reality, is to embrace the disintegrated life, and in a prince it is particularly dangerous for the commonwealth: corruptio optima est pessima. More was to be concerned with the integration of appearance and reality throughout his life, forced as he was in the end to conform himself to the role of martyr on the scaffold, a stage that was at once a place of execution and of play. In a sense, Richard, like Luther, was all that More did not want to be. The meaning of More's *History of King Richard III* is quite unambiguous, and maybe considered an attack on those who attack meaning itself by playing roles that, apparently virtuous, fracture the connection between common sense (widely understood) and language, or between appearance and reality. In this sense, the *History* anticipates the attacks on Luther and Tyndale. The meaning of *Utopia*, in contrast, has been debated since its publication at Louvain in 1516. However, we would be wrong to conclude that its meaning is too subtle to be discerned. A duality of appearance and reality is at play in *Utopia*, as well as other dualities inherent in the dialogue form: Book I and Book II; reality and ideal; More and Hythloday; Europe and Utopia. There is an apparent duality within the main character himself: Hythloday means "talker of nonsense" and Raphael means "God has healed"-the name of the archangel who brings healing to blind Tobit. Hythloday appears to talk nonsense to some, particularly the lawyer and the friar in Book I, but the character of More, in contrast, welcomes much of what he has to say at the end of Book II. *Utopia* is a contribution to the
Renaissance debate about the *optimus status reipublicae*, rather than a blueprint for society or, indeed, a self-contained political philosophy. It posits the value of common human reason in the ordering of society, as opposed to the oppressive rule of arbitrary absolutism, the dangers of which are seen in Book I. More's *Utopia* stands for reason and natural law against the craft and guile of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Rather than put his faith in the necessary evil of an unscrupulous prince, More shows what might be achieved by discourse in properly constituted assemblies, and by open-minded, reasonable men—men like Cardinal Morton in Book I.

In its discussion of the best state of the commonwealth, its acceptance of a Christian imperative towards social reform, its enactment of reasoned debate upon public matters, and its attitude of judicious inquiry, Book I of *Utopia* shows us the humanist project at work. It also points us towards an answer to what we might call the riddle of the Charterhouse: why did More choose the active rather than the contemplative life, and then apparently create a hypothetical society that bears many characteristics of a monastery? The answer seems to involve the question of balance. In its ideal, medieval society involved a careful balance of public and private things such that the two were not so discrete, or even antithetical, as they have become since the birth of modernity. As Book I outlines, the balance of the mixed form of ownership represented by the community of property in the monasteries, and the private (or familial) holdings outside them, was becoming upset under the pressure of the economic upheavals of More's time. The privatization of property, in the enclosure of common land by the powerful, would lead to the destruction of the common ideal, both in the monasteries and in the class who depended on the common land for the maintenance of themselves and their families. This economic fact reflected the intellectual bases of Catholic Europe. More knew that on every level of the Christendom that was his world, a subtle and complementary interchange of the private and the common was at work to keep the individual person and the community in fruitful balance. Conscience is the faculty that negotiates this balance in moral action. Thus, the examination of the condition of England and
Europe in Book I focuses on the moral consequences of the pride and greed of dynastic wars and imperial ambitions: dislocation from society after military service, unemployment, robbery, and the potent symbolic inversion of the sheep eating up the people. Hythloday's analysis seems largely accepted in Book I, but his remedy of the abolition of private property is opposed by the character of More in the story, and there is no reason to suppose that the view of More the author was any different.

Hythloday embodies two extremes without being able to integrate them, or bring them into balance. He advocates the holding of all property in common, but he has privatized himself completely. On of the first things we learn about him is that he has given away all his property, dividing it among his brothers, in order that he might travel the world. "Now I live exactly as I please," he boasts, and he does not intend to give up his happy state by entering the service of kings. He thus resembles a peculiarly modern type of man, one who would be at home in the fictitious world of the modern liberal utopia, where one may do exactly as he pleases having yielded up all control over matters of importance to the all-powerful, benevolent state (a paradox with which we currently grapple). In the real world of More, meaning comes from common consent, rather than from private illumination, as in the case of Hythloday's version of the Platonic philosopher king, Utopus, the founder of Utopia. Whatever is good in Utopia remains nowhere so long as Hythloday maintains his separation from the political world, where the exercise of many private consciences work to bring about the common good. Custom and tradition, representing the accumulated wisdom of conscience, is an important aspect of this process, since as Peter Giles says to Hythloday, "Long usage has provided us with much that makes for pleasant living, and we have discovered certain things by experience which no amount of mental effort could have produced." Hythloday's retreat into his own private authority (the character of More reminds us at the end of Book II that Hythloday would not like to be contradicted) should be disquieting to us as we hear his description of Utopia, just as the claim of a private authority by Henry VIII or Martin Luther disquieted Thomas More.
Thus, although the most obvious classical influence on *Utopia* is Plato, the work does not endorse the Platonic tradition of government being in the hands of a specialist who has the leisure (*otium*) and expertise to rule. Over against this is the Ciceronian tradition of civic humanism, in which the commonwealth is served by the duty of all to their fellow men in their common business (*negotium*) of life. Hythloday is a type of the Platonic traveler whose ideal is located outside of Europe, which seems to his mind utterly mired in corrupt laws designed for the rich to rob the poor. In Book I, for instance, he makes some strong criticisms, with which More appears to sympathize, of enclosures, But Hythloday resembles the Western intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century who went to the Soviet Union and saw a shining vision of the good society. His idealism is his strength, but also his weakness. In contrast to Hythloday, the character of More adopts a Ciceronian view of the value of philosophy in political life which does not depend on the virtuous, all-powerful prince-something of which Hythloday, admittedly, despairs of ever seeing:

"There is no place for philosophers among kings," [said Hythloday].

"Yes there is," [More] answered, "but not for that academic philosophy which fits everything neatly into place, there is however, another, more sophisticated philosophy which accommodates itself to the scene at hand and acts its part with polish and finesse. It is this philosophy that you should use. Otherwise, it would be as if, while a comedy by Plautus were being acted...you were suddenly to appear in a philosopher's garb and recite the passage from the Octavia where Seneca debates with Nero."

Seneca of course, like More, tried to influence a tyrant for good, and was to lose his life for his pains; it was not a role that More wanted to play. The dramatic metaphor is striking, and reveals More's sense of life both as play and as a play, but the main point here is that he resists the kind of abstract, speculative philosophy in politics that
Edmund Burke was also to reject some two hundred years later. The ending of *Utopia* suggests a desire, however, that the Ciceronian and Platonic positions might achieve some kind of synthesis, as the character of More welcomes, under qualification, what Hythloday tells him of Utopia.

The description of Utopia that we (and the character of More) receive from Hythloday in Book II is neither ridiculous nor repulsive, as are, for instance, some of the lands that Gulliver comes across in his travels. More's purpose is not satirical, although there is a certain ambiguity in his approach towards both England and Utopia in the book as a whole. A central puzzle has been how a Catholic martyr can appear to approve of a Utopian society that bears many of the marks of our modern, liberal, secularized democracy in that it countenances euthanasia, divorce, married priests, and women priests, but not private property, corporal mortification, or hunting and even dislikes the unfortunate necessity of killing animals for food. The totalism of Utopia we find discomforting; it reminds us of communism or national socialism, or of modern dystopian fiction such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, despite the lack in Utopia of the brutality on which those regimes were founded. We have to conclude that there is much of which More does not approve in Utopia, a heathen country which is nonetheless on the verge of conversion to Christianity, partly because it is peculiarly receptive to it. What More does approve, however, is the place of reason among the Utopians, the felicity that it promotes, and the common life that it makes possible. There is freedom of conscience, although freedom of speech is confined to certain situations and contexts, something which More approved. Licit pleasure, the highest being virtue, is regarded as a proper end of human life, and should be noted against any impression we might receive of a drab uniformity-of dress, for example.

What attracts More in Hythloday's description of Utopia is the unfettered fruitfulness there of natural law. Hythloday devotes more attention to religion than to any other aspect of Utopia, and like the pre-Christian ideal republics of classical (humane) letters, Utopia shows what might be achieved, despite the lack of the Christian
Revelation. The Utopians fall into error-fallen nature cannot help that-and, as we have noted, they sanction such things as euthanasia and divorce on "reasonable" grounds. But even here their philosophy does not wholly err: there are all sorts of restrictions on euthanasia and divorce that would not be countenanced in our society. The essential way in which Utopia differs from either the modern liberal, secular democracy or the modern totalitarian state is that it is founded on religion, one that arises from a natural religious sense. More follows Cicero in assuming an innate religious sense, in addition to the five physical ones, which allows the Utopians to achieve a largely common monotheism, and to have intimations of a greater revelation. The natural religion of Utopia is in accord with the principles of natural law as understood by the Church, following Aristotle. They were, moreover, principles that the Protestant reformers were to call into question:

The virtuous life is consonant with nature, as ordained by God himself. He follows the path of nature who allows reason to master his passions. Reason first enkindles in us mortals love and adoration of the Divine Majesty to whom we owe what we are and what we ever will be. Secondly, reason shows us the possibility of and excites in us the desire for leading a life that allows the least anxiety and the greatest happiness for ourselves, a life dedicated to mutual help.

Happiness and pleasure are the ends of human life for the Utopians, but it should be noted that virtue is for them the highest pleasure. It is this which allows them freedom from tyranny, and freedom from religious enthusiasm. A Christian convert among them who begins to preach the cult of Christ with more zeal than prudence, and who condemns all other religions in Utopia, is ultimately exiled for sedition rather than for his contempt of those other religions. Denial of the immortality of the soul or of the existence of Providence are the only religious opinions that are forbidden freedom of expression, but it should be remembered that the norms of Utopia are quite different from the norms of Christendom, which possesses Revela-
Lion. It is to this point that the character of More alludes at the end of Book II, though he does not mean that Christendom is released from the norms of natural law; rather, his whole purpose is to direct attention to these norms as part of the humanist project of reform.

This project included the improvement of the condition of the academy, and the extension there of liberal learning. It is difficult to overestimate the importance for Thomas More both of established traditions of meaning, and of human reason as an indispensable means by which meaning is discovered or articulated. Language is the incarnation of meaning, and just as reason is possessed by every man, so is language, to a greater or lesser degree. Since meaning arises from discourse, rather than from the individual mind, language must be capable of being commonly understood, if reason is to exist at all. In writing to Martin Dorp, about the time that he was writing Utopia, More attacked the grammarians of his day who threatened "the destruction of the liberal arts":

... a new kind of nonsense, worse than that of the sophists, has gradually replaced dialectics. With its mask of brilliant wit, this nonsense has great appeal for its hearers.\footnote{38}

After examining the contorted, insane "logic" of some of their examples, whereby meaning is enforced by strict grammatical rules at variance with plain reason, More asserts that words do not belong to a particular profession. They are not private property, to be borrowed by anyone who wants them for his own private use. Speech is, to be sure, a common possession, but they spoil some of the words that they have gotten from cobblers. They have taken them from the common people, and they misuse what is common. But it is their objection that their rule of logic demands a certain interpretation. Will this damned rule, designed in some corner by men who hardly know how to speak, impose new laws of speech on the world? Grammar teaches correct speech. It does not devise extraordinary rules of language but advises those who are
unskilled in the ways of speech how to observe the world's ordinary customs of speech.\textsuperscript{3}

Except that today we are faced with a perverse kind of anti-grammar rather than grammar-gone-mad, More could be writing about the postmodernists:

The precepts of dialecticians are not so demanding as they are persuading, for it is their duty to follow our custom in the use of language and to force us to move in any direction, with reasons that are true. On the other hand, sophists lead us to a spot where we are surprised to find ourselves. They accomplish this through their deceptive use of words. The cleverness by which men show that they are victorious in an argument and the ingenuity by which they decide in their own favor is both stupid and a foolish use of cleverness and ingenuity; for we do not understand their way of using words, which is contrary to universal acceptance.

Like reason and the Catholic Faith, language is for More a common possession, all three serving the purpose of \textit{communication}, in the various levels of meaning of that word. That More is writing about Latin in the letter above merely intensifies his anti-elitist point; the universal language should be seen as truly universal and made accessible, not hidden. Writing in English, More's own style is accessible, fluent, supple, engagingly humorous and full of commonplace and homely illustration, and it is worth noting that in his \textit{History of the English Language}, prepended to his great \textit{Dictionary}, Samuel Johnson devoted more space to More than to Chaucer.

The threat that More perceived from the Protestant reformers, then, was a threat to commonly understood meaning, accessible to all people of whatever degree, and established by long tradition. The point where More clearly sees Luther's direction for the first time is in reading \textit{On the Babylonish Captivity}. In this work, Luther attacked the whole sacramental system of Catholic Christianity, and especially the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Mass was the
center of More's spirituality and, indeed, the center of the whole of Christendom. The doctrine of transubstantiation points to a continuing incarnation of spirit and matter, spreading out into the whole of medieval civilization. The fury of More's response to Luther is explained by what he perceived to be at stake: the whole structure of meaning upon which his world depended. Luther is depicted as the spreader of "insane calumnies", and like the sophistical, pedantic grammarians in the letter to Dorp, and the incipient forces of princely absolutism against which *Utopia* stands, Luther's attack on the doctrine of the Eucharist is one against common sense, innate reason, itself. Heresy, for More, threatened the basic order of the medieval mind, and More's hatred of it is similar to the hatred of racism in our time. It would not be an overstatement to say that he considered it a crime against humanity, in the particular sense that the medieval humanist and classical idea of man as a rational creature whose nature enabled him to reach Godwards was threatened. Instead of reason, Luther posited the will. God himself did not work according to reason, but according to his own inscrutable purpose. He allows, for instance, the existence of tyrants who must not be opposed because

The world is far too wicked to be worthy of good and pious lords. It must have...tyrants. This and other chastisement are rather what it has deserved, and to resist them is nothing else than to resist God's chastisement. As humbly as I conduct myself when God sends me a sickness, so humbly should I conduct myself towards the evil government which the same God also sends me.

The reformers gave over all earthly authority to the prince and his laws, continental Roman unlike English law seeing the prince as lawgiver rather than its protector. The prince should keep to the divine law as revealed in Scripture, but the idea that the laws of the land arising from natural law had some authority over the king was being increasingly brought into question. The English follower of Luther, William Tyndale; wrote:
He that judgeth the king judgeth God.... If the king sin he must be reserved unto the judgement and vengeance of God...the king is in this world without law, and may at his lust do right and wrong and shall give accounts but to God only.  

However much the Protestant emphasis on the exclusive temporal authority of the prince was a reaction against the revolt of the German peasantry, inspired by Luther's earlier cry of Christian liberty, it was no doubt fed by growing political ideas of absolutism, and by the view that man was entirely mired in corruption, entirely at the mercy of God's will, damned unless justified by faith alone. The whole of the temporal sphere, previously seen in the Catholic scheme as having been brought into a sacramental order, was seen as essentially lawless except for the force of will of a (possibly, but not necessarily) Christian prince. The order to which Thomas More looked was written in the heart of man, and protected and restrained both king and subject, and however much he inclined temperamentally towards judges than juries in the practice of the law, he always believed the group to be more authoritative than the individual.

The two means through which More argued against the heretics were the law and letters, means whereby reason could reveal truth. He was asked to write in English against the Protestants by Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, who permitted him to read and own the heretical writings. In the Dialogue Concerning Heresies (1528), More emphasizes that reason as well as faith, is needed for the interpretation of Scripture, and his emphasis includes also the importance of humane letters:

I deny not but that grace and God's especial help is the great thing therein, yet useth he for an instrument man's reason thereto. God helpeth us to eat also but yet not without our mouth.... [R]eason is by study, labor, and exercise of logic, philosophy and other liberal arts corroborate and quickened, and that judgement both in them and also in orators, laws and stories, much ripened. And albeit poets be with many men taken but for painted words, yet do they much help the
judgement and make a man among other things well furnished of one special thing [wit] without which all learning is half lame.... And, therefore, are in mine opinion these Lutherans in a mad mind that would now have all learning save Scripture only, clean cast away.  

In the same work, More defends the translation of Scripture into the vernacular, under authority; when later accused by Tyndale of double standards, More pointed out the mischievous intent of Tyndale's choice of words. The *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532-33) is lengthy and vituperative, but it is worth noting a revealing fictional exchange between Barnes, a heretic friar, and a simple housewife. Barnes fails to satisfy the housewife on his interpretation of Scripture; she points out that the reformers disagree among themselves:

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All this considered, I were a but a fool to leave the known Catholic Church, whom I have hitherto taken for my very mother, and come from her to yours, of the truth of which you are after all in doubt. For if I leave this mother Church, where am I to seek another?'
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More's point that a simple housewife can see more clearly than the heretics is ironical but indirectly it is a defense of common sense, that a housewife may judge of these matters at all. This view is in keeping with More's not opposing in principle the translation of Scripture into the vernacular, but he does believe that common people must receive the Scripture from authorized preachers so that private judgment does not lead to error; juries need judges, and *vice versa*.

In the final analysis, it was for this principle at the heart of Christendom that Thomas More was willing to undergo imprisonment and execution. To Thomas Cromwell, he wrote:

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And, therefore, since all Christendom is one corps [body], I cannot perceive how any member thereof may without the common assent of the body depart from the common head.
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And then if we may not lawfully leave it ourselves, I cannot perceive (but if the thing were a treating [under discussion] in a general council) what the question could avail whether the primacy were instituted by God or by the Church. As for the general councils assembled lawfully, I never could perceive but that in the declaration of truths to be believed and to be standen to [followed], the authority thereof ought to be taken for undoubted, or else were there in nothing no certainty, but through Christendom upon every man's affectionate reason, all things might be brought from day to day to continual ruffle and confusion, from which by the general councils, the spirit of God assisting, every such council well assembled keepeth and ever shall keep the corps of his Catholic Church.

In More's view, neither a prince, nor any other person could consider himself free of either natural law, or positive law made on the basis of natural law, or divine law. Conscience has come to mean little more nowadays than a right to private judgment, but for More, conscience, like positive law, had to be conformed to a higher law. One is obliged to act on what one believes to be true, but what one believes to be true has to be informed by reason and Revelation. Conscience, therefore, comes to mean not simply what I believe but what we believe, that which is known together. In this respect, when Robert Bolt spoke of More in the preface to his play A Man For All Seasons as "a hero of selfhood", the phrase is potentially misleading. More died not believing in the autonomy of the self, but in the self as integrated with, and sustained by, the communion of saints in the whole Church-militant, suffering and triumphant. His own integrity was but the reflection and personalizing of the integrity of the Church and of Christendom. His paradoxical position of being a lone conformist reminds us that consensus cannot be reduced to the majority opinion at a particular moment in time. Rather, consensus must be seen in the context of history. History has proved that the death of Thomas More, although marking the end of the medieval consensus he embodied, did not see the death of the perennial principles which underpinned it, and for which Thomas More died.
The historical More may evade us, but his importance endures in the moral imagination. Why is it that, as John Guy, says, we all think we know More? Perhaps we know him as the integrated man, another sense of the Renaissance ideal of hominum omnium horarum: as Richard Marius wrote, "somehow very much an indispensable ideal we cherish for ourselves." He is the imagined mirror of our best selves, a personality in which the common humanity he affirmed is transfigured and seen as heroic. He endures in the common mind because he did not, unlike some of his contemporary opponents, loathe the human nature given him, despite his awareness of its limitations. The peculiar force of Robert Bolt's drama (doubtless, as Guy says, "appalling history") derives from the inherently dramatic qualities of Thomas More's personality and life, and it is perhaps through the moral imagination that Thomas More can be best known today. A knowledge, however, of his writings will not only deepen this picture, but also provide us with his even more valuable philosophy, one "which accommodates itself to the scene at hand and acts its part with polish and finesse."

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NOTES
3 See Guy,1.
5 Guy, 113.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 49.
8 See Wegemer, 15.

*Ibid.,*


*Ibid., xi.*

*Ibid., xxii.*

*Ibid., xxiii.*

*Ibid., xxiv.*


Marius, *Thomas More, 12.*


Marius, *Thomas More, 471*

This view of sovereignty was always implicit in English common law, or the law of the land, and at times in English history, the spirit of the common law emerged to become explicit to errant princes, before retiring discreetly into the wings.


*Ibid., 4.*

*Ibid., 520.*

*Ibid., 33.*

*Ibid., 25.*

Roper, in *The Life of Sir Thomas More.*


*Ibid., 32.*

*Ibid., 51.*
38 Ibid., 48.
36 Cf, Burke: "Man is by his constitution a religious animal." Reflections on the Revolution in France, (1790).
37 Greene and Dolan, Utopia and Other Writings, 69.
38 Ibid., 143.
39 Ibid., 144.
40 Ibid., 145.
41 Martin Luther, quoted in C. Morris, Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 42.
42 William Tyndale, quoted in Morris, Political Thought in England, 37.
43 Greene and Dolan, Utopia and Other Writings, 200.
45 Green and Dolan, Utopia and Other Writings, 259.
46 Marius, Thomas More, 519.