The Hermeneutic Dilemma in Thomas More’s *Utopia*

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**Abstract**

Thomas More’s *Utopia* is subject to diverse interpretations on as various levels as the diversity of the literary text. Far from being a simple object, the literary text follows different principles, meanings and connections. The shift from examining the text interpretation to its sign representation reflects the major shift of emphasis in contemporary literary theory and criticism. This paper is structured on these two orientations. The reader of More’s *Utopia* is left guessing as to which parts of the brilliant jeu d’esprit are seriously intended to raise a hermeneutic ambiguity and which are mere paradox. On the one hand, there is an implicit “heuristic method” of great importance to a better understanding of the book. On the other, the explicit content can be better examined through the “scholastic method” which, “though only implicit in the work, used by More to make his criticism of the world created by an abuse of that method all the more ironical”.

The present paper focuses on the hermeneutic dilemma of More’s *Utopia*. The text interpretations that step outside the structural poetics suggest that, as a humanist, More establishes a distance between him and his own text through the use of irony and satire. Only after a postmodern reading of the text will apparent clarities of statement turn into delightful puzzles or vexatious anxieties of interpretation. This relative plethora of interpretations of *Utopia* is true and the themes, the dialogues and the language use are symbolic of it.

**Keywords:** Utopia, Post/Structural Poetics, Mimetic/Rhetorical Symbolism, Postmodernism Hermeneutic, Dilemma.

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Utopia’s Post/Structural Poetics

For a long time, literary works have often been regarded as the products of the author’s life and expression of his/her inner self. However, with the introduction of modern and postmodern criticism, their focus turned to the structure of the text, giving it a primary and unusual prominence over any other element and belittling the role of the author to that of the organization of the pre-existing material. Roland Barthes stipulates that the main function of the author is the organization of material which obviously existed before him. 2 In a similar vein, Barthes and the other structuralists (Greimas, Genette, Todorov ...), are chiefly concerned with the literary devices which make all surface phenomena belong to some structural system whether or not we are consciously aware of what that system is. This Modern literary criticism dismisses any external factors and focuses mainly on the text and its structures. It shows how words work together to produce a meaning solely conveyed by the structure. Realizing the crucial aspect of studying the text’s structure very closely, structuralists have diligently attempted to generate definite roles of structures. In this context, Peter Barry refers to Roland Barthes’s Mythologies stating that: “the individual item is structuralized, or contextualized by structure”. (Beginning Theory 48) Structuralists, then, moved beyond the classical ‘liberal humanist’ interpretation of a literary text:

The most basic difference between the liberal humanist and structuralist reading is that the structuralist’s comments on structure, symbol and design, become paramount and are the main focus of the commentary, while the emphasis on any wider moral significance, and indeed on interpretation itself in the broad sense, is very much reduced. So instead of going straight into the content, in the liberal humanist manner, the structuralist presents a series of parallels, echoes, reflections, patterns, and contrasts, so that the narrative becomes highly schematized, is translated, in fact, into what we might call a “verbal diagram”. (Barry 52)

Barry’s observation enriches our understanding of what he calls a ‘liberal humanist manner’ to interpret literature. This method introduces a range of underlying parallels with the structures of language or what he calls the ‘structural system’. To expose these parallels between the structure and its ideological background which is visible in More’s text, is to set up different hermeneutic tools than those used by the ancient ‘liberal humanist’ and the structuralist critical approach. My contention is that poststructuralism has shared set of ideas that inverse the previous assumptions and provides a different notion of relation between text, discourse and context.

Thus, the text should be read as symptomatic of the discourse’s internal tensions. More’s Utopia should be read against its explicit assertions and argumentation in order to expose the problems it hides and the contradictions it tries to resolve. This textual analysis focuses on the fissures between explicit content and literary embodiment which may be expressed in various ways: contradictions in the structure of the argument or paradoxes that stem from it; the fictional imagery to conceal the real problems; gaps between the rhetorical or metaphoric aspects of the text and its content. This rule will ultimately help to better grasp the meanings unfolded in Utopia. Most importantly, it accounts for the hermeneutic dilemma

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which requires a re-reading of More’s text stretching out the modern and postmodern approaches of, among others, Deconstruction and Marxism, because they conflate the text to discourse and context.

Read from this angle, More’s *Utopia* invites to the fundamental dynamics of its divergent interpretations wavering between the syntagmatic relations of its particular structures and the associative relations specific to a collective way of thinking. The images implemented in the explicit argumentation of the text provide a utopian vision to the wor(l)d. The central contention in this study is that there is a hidden level of meaning including contradictions to the central notion of More’s humanism and inversed plows of the humanist discourse.

*Utopia* comprises two books. In the first one the use of dialogue tends to show a varied range of discussions on government and society between various speakers or *personae.* Each character has his individual point of view. These characters are, Peter Giles, Hythloday, and the *persona* More who may or may not represent the views of More the writer. The formal structure of Thomas More’s *Utopia* may seem simple at first sight. The book, however, is another form of Plato’s legacy and influence. It comprises two books, the first of which contains, in the form of a dialogue between the *persona* More and an imaginary traveller, Raphael Hythloday, a sharp criticism of English social conditions, the enclosure movement, the penal code and the existing pattern of international relations and the lack of council for the kings and princes as it is observed in the following passage:

> The most part for all princes have more delight in warlike matters and feats of chivalry (the knowledge whereof I neither have nor desire) than in the good feats of peace, and employ much more study how by right or by wrong to enlarge their dominions, than how well and peaceable to rule and govern that they have already. (*Utopia* 22)

As it is inferred above, the dramatic setting of More’s *Utopia* occurs in times of social upheaval related to the tumultuous foreign affairs and the idleness of the noble class in More’s era. This situation is clearly opined in this extract:

> These gentlemen, I say, do not only live in idleness themselves, but also carry about with them at their tails a great flock or train of idle and loitering serving-men, which never learned any craft whereby to get their livings. (*Utopia*, 25)

Book I, therefore, focuses on the evils of European society and deals with the question very pertinent to the situation of More at the time of writing *Utopia*, as to suggest that humanists should become involved with royal politics:

> For I am sure there is no prince living, that would not be very glad of you, as a man not only able highly to delight him with your profound learning and this your knowledge of countries and peoples, but also meet to instruct him with examples and help him with counsel. (*Utopia* 21)

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1 D. M. Bevington, “The Dialogue in *Utopia*: Two Sides to the Question”, p. 496
In Book II a social commentary is made to ponder on the predicament of post-Renaissance era and to foreshadow the idealistic solutions that would be presented through the account of the utopians. In the form of a lengthy tale related by Hythloday, book II is a description of the social, economic, political and religious conditions of the Isle of Nowhere, Utopia. Indeed, there were new perspectives propounded by a mercantile spirit in the 16th century Europe which was ridden with wars, social and religious tensions. At that era, the Renaissance humanist views of Erasmus and More flourished to enhance a social and political improvement to achieve collective welfare. The humanists’ presuppositions are that “the human world was a world made by men”. Their “actual intellectual activities thus legitimately belonged to their specific milieus, traditions, interests and ideologies” and this “notion of knowledge also constituted the theoretical basis for the vita activa, which in turn served to legitimize the humanist’s pursuits of public careers”.4

Apart from the social welfare, the structural poetics of Utopia includes an ethical humanist perspective. The conversation of More with Giles in Book I is a representation of the sixteenth century Christian idealism which blends classical utopian thought set forth by Plato in his Republic with the beliefs and practices of Christians. Though at first sight they seem similar, the structure of Plato’s Republic and More’s Utopia are different. Palto’s treatise is a philosophical work discussing abstract notions such as the soul, justice, virtue, etc. His ideal city is not to be thought of as an actuality or even as a practical possibility. It didn’t aim at defining the perfect state. Plato used the state as a large scale picture of the soul in his search for the perfect soul. He projected the soul on the ideal state. Therefore, there is a difference between a “discursive” philosophical argument about an ideal city of Plato’s Republic and a circumstantial description of utopian society in More’s Utopia as the author claims in Book I:

For whereas your Plato judgeth that weal-publics shall by this means attain perfect felicity, either if philosophers be kings, or else if kings give themselves to the study of philosophy, how far, I pray you, shall commonwealths then be from this felicity, if philosophers will vouchsafe to instruct kings with their good counsel?. (Utopia, 41)

The most common observation that historians of philosophy make about Utopia is that Thomas More wrote the book in imitation of Plato’s Republic. But while there is some truth to this claim, it is a misleading statement. It gives the impression that either solely or primarily refers to the Republic and suggests that it was the only or at least the major Platonic dialogue that affected More. In addition, the differences between the two works are of great importance for a better understanding of these texts. For Plato as for More the ideal state represents a model how to solve and/or to criticize the society’s flaws taking into account the following aspects: economical upheavals, communication and politics. They created societies in which these weaknesses, according to them, are solved so that the society will run smoothly and the cities will remain happy. Yet, critics such as Paul Turner, opines that: “Many have found it impossible to believe that Utopia is really offered as a model of perfection, or that More is

seriously recommending the Utopian way of life.”5 The crystallization of such an attitude has been carried further through the exhaustive efforts to define the utopian literary text as a genre. It conflates the distinctions between More’s utopian world and Plato’s ideal republic:

Many specialists and utopian scholars alike have reached the conclusion that the utopian texts they have submitted to careful analysis have seemed to evade the genre typology one would have them fit (…) Actually, his (More’s) book epitomizes very accurately this shift between spatio-temporal trends. On the other, if one follows the structure “No place” may represent T. More’s actual society and the “good place”, his utopian Island. Thus, stressing even more the ambiguous element i.e., the reality of his illusion and the unreality precisely of reality.6

The form of Utopia is conceived as a hybrid representation that stimulates the critics’ divergent interpretations. As a literary text, Utopia is regarded as: “so complex and many-sided subject (…) its origins, its development and its uses as a type of social theory (shows its) distinctiveness as a literary form put to the service of social analysis and social criticism.”7 This distinct literary genre comprises two parts: part dialogue and part dramatic monologue. The stylistic device of questioning and answering is used as a literary form inherited from ancient Greek works. This form of monologue marks the ideal imaginary republic of Utopia. It is clearly structured as formal oration called by Hexter the “discourse on Utopia” and is preceded by the dialogue of book I called, also by, “dialogue of counsel”.8 In this part More introduces both himself (persona More) and Peter Giles together with Raphael Hythloday, as characters. The dialogue in Book I and the concluding pre-oration the “Sermon on Pride” given at the end of book II provide a contextual frame for the “discourse on Utopia” in book II. (Hexter 1973) As a rhetorical tool, the dialogue or the “verbal diagram”, to borrow Peter Barry’s term, is not only meant to answer the questions and to highlight the author’s inner mind. In each of his stories, Hythloday, for example, concentrates on deconstructive aspects of the European social and political order. It seems that this conception of an ideal society is implemented to question and to examine before doing anything to reform. Talking about the situation of the thieves, Hythloday admits that:

Neither there is any punishment so horrible that it can keep them from stealing which have no other craft whereby to get their living. Therefore in this point not only but also the most part of the world be like evils schoolmasters, which be readier to beat than to teach their scholars”. (Utopia, 25)

The discourses of the utopian outlets are cynical and critical and their hermeneutic dilemma undergrounds the gaps and contradictions of More’s society. These reflect an intellectual vision implied by More’s general claims showing that the utopian discourse is not simply a critique of sixteenth-century Europe but rather an embodiment of his testimony of the moral, social, and political utility of the humanist intellectual premises. Though history of

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philosophy reveals that More was a Renaissance Neo-Platonist, it is likely that he was an “ideal Christian”, to borrow Baxter’s term, who uses the classical philosophy to show Utopia’s new facets for a perfect Christendom. Thus, *Utopia* elucidates the central role of ancient philosophy in clarifying how:

In contrast to the medieval scholastic philosophers and theologians—with whom the humanists struggled for cultural hegemony—the views elaborated by Erasmus were not primarily derived from eternal metaphysical and religious truths. The Erasmian humanist (More), in other words, did not produce knowledge and instruct society from a transcendent sphere. The Erasmian humanist was therefore a modern universal intellectual, perhaps the first universal intellectual. (Yoran, 2010: 2)

The above statement urges to open the horizon to a postmodern reading of More’s text. In this context, Derrida claims that “the text overturns all the limits assigned to it”. This dimension is reinforced by the heterogeneity of conflictual meanings that inhabit any text. Moreover, ‘the fabric of traces’ is a further linguistic argument that shapes Derrida’s view of the text. Read from this angle, ‘the fabric of traces’ in More’s *Utopia* helps to properly understand the significance of his ‘borrowings’. In this context, one may wonder why More wrote *Utopia* with such a heavy dependence on ancient philosophy if he aspired to create new instruments in a struggle for intellectual hegemony at that time?

Visibly, More’s *Utopia* is intrinsically related to Plato’s *Republic*. He drew heavily on Plato. It is the nature of the Renaissance texts to be neo-classical and thus indebted to Greek philosophy. Yet, even on the structural level one may notice that More is distanced from Plato. He intended to make it clear from the start that he turned from Plato’s connotations:

> The ancients called me utopia or nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato’s *Republic*, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words, I alone have exhibited on men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or happy land.  

Aware of the *Republic*’s style, More wanted his book to be deliberately different from it. He painted his work with a description of an existing state. Moreover, More’s text appeals to the general reader. Hence, the plot leaves the reader doubtful about whether to take the content seriously or not: “When Raphael had made an end of his tale (...) I need confess and grant that many things be in the Utopian weal-public which in our cities I may rather wish for than hope for”. (*Utopia*, 138) “Utopia”, indeed, is a term that allows a suggestion of doubt as to how seriously More should take what we read. Thus, by the end of the book most readers are concerned with just that dilemma, wondering if More intends to make the reader think of it all, whether he was joking or in earnest. Similarly, the seemingly purposeful expansiveness of the title, “Utopia”, introduces a series of dualism or oppositions which raises the hermeneutic dilemma that we may accept without suspicion. Its polyphonic tone addresses the reader

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using two “narrators” or speakers involved in the debate. This frames the story telling in *Utopia* along with the notoriously vexing aspect of the work linked to the uncertainty as to how far one may take Thomas More as being in sympathy with the views expressed by his fictional traveler Raphael Hythloday. In this context, *Utopia* suggests manifold meanings that convey satire. This type of satirical texts “are understood as utterances which are inextricably bound up with context of situation, with participants in discourse and with frameworks of knowledge.” Moreover, “More” the persona is the one who takes part in the fictional discussion and it is clear that More the author wants to distance himself from this figure as fictional, not necessarily to be identified with the Thomas More of real life. While More has the same name as Sir Thomas More, the pronoun of “I” implemented in the text of *Utopia* is “he”. It’s a subtle clue that while More bears his name and perhaps some of his views, Hythloday (the “he” who is also “I”) embodies aspects of Sir Thomas More’s beliefs and ideas. In fact, one of the lessons the structure of More’s book teaches is the distinction between the fictional image and the factual one; between hypothesis and possibility. Indeed, during More’s life, the power of the word was hugely increased:

Humanist concerns with the word have a strong moral and political dimension; questions of authorship, of authority, of the power of rhetoric, of the responsibilities accompanying the knowledge which brings such power, were urgent in the increasingly secular world which Erasmus and More and their fellows addressed with such anxiety that the spirit should not be lost to the letter, or the conceptual be buried the material”. (*Utopia*, 1992: xiv)

The varied range of interpretations of the book leads to its hermeneutic dilemma and throws such a responsibility of judgment on the reader’s shoulder. This sheds new light on how to instigate *Utopia* which is embedded in the context of More’s particular humanist reformation vision rather than belonging to an enclosed self-sufficient realm of literature, as the structuralists substantiate in their arguments. Moreover, by the very ordering of the literary structure and devices (dialogue, parallels to ancient writing, ideology, irony, satire, etc.), More did not induce the truth for the reader who should deduce the truth at his own through the act of reading: “Just as the hidden God, who will always remain hidden, provokes us to try to uncover the veil, to discover perfect truth and perfect morality, so utopia’s ‘nowherness’ incites the search for it”.

More’s *Utopia* sets up the paradigm of the novel’s literary settings and structures using both a realistic tone to represent the real world and a fictional one to stir the reader’s ethos. The adaptation of More’s neo-classical text to the spirit of the age is meant to make it suitable for a new purpose or situation. In this context, Barthes assumes that adaptation is a ‘writerly’ activity deployed for ‘readerly’ ends. Barthes demonstrates that the novel’s reading transforms life into destiny, souvenirs into utile act and duration into a significative and effective time: « L’acte littéraire, suprêmement ambigu, n’accouchait d’une création consacrée par la société qu’au moment où il a réussi à détruire la densité existentielle d’une

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durée jusqu’alors sans signification ».

This brings to the importance of the reader’s reception of More’s symbolism and his ability to realize how his narrative is set in stark contrast with the notion of mimicry to ancient literary ethos. The hermeneutic dilemma, however, depends for its effectiveness, on the belief in and exploitation of the difference and distance between words or events and their contexts.

**Utopia’s Mimetic /Rhetorical Symbolism:**

As it is clearly inferred from the start, this study adopts a resolutely bimodal aspect of reading fluctuating between the intrinsic and the extrinsic schools of criticism in order to avoid a prejudicial breaking up of the approach clarity. This second part shows how *Utopia* is a characteristically open-ended humanistic exercise, educative in its form and content. It flees the ancient method of the authoritative “authorial” voice telling to the reader what to think. It ponders on the conjecture that “Utopia is a variegated project, the meeting place of many purposes and many disciplines of thought. The richness of its resources gives it great capacity for survival, and revival”. (Kumar, vii) The author’s vision to the wor(l)d suggests his humanist view about an ideal society, dreams of perfection or rational efforts to remake man’s environment to achieve “the best state of commonwealth”. Other interpretations are also generated by the flourishing provisions of literary theory and criticism that require new modalities to re-visit a literary text:

By the contemporary discovery of the symbolic and following the emergence of psychoanalysis, of structuralism in linguistics and anthropology, of semiotics together with its new field of “narratology”, of communications theory, and even of such events as the emergence of a politics of “surplus consciousness” (Rudolf Bahro) in the 1960s, we have come to feel that abstract ideas and concepts are not necessarily intelligible entities in their own right.

According to R. S. Sylvester, “The *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More is a book which has meant many different things to many different men”. The notion of ‘utopia’ conjures up with a postmodern approach of its mimetic and a rhetorical symbolism. From a mimetic symbolism perspective, we have observed that More’s *Utopia* is located within the broader context of the sixteenth-century Greek revival in England. In fact, More and the other humanists in England such as Erasmus became the first Englishmen to learn Greek and to make a polemical point of preferring Greece to Rome. During the period of *Utopia*’s preparation and publication, responding to opponents of the new Greek learning, Erasmus and his disciples launched a particularly energetic attack on Roman philosophy. It is argued that *Utopia* intervenes in this quarrel by dramatizing a confrontation between the values of the Roman republican tradition and those of a rival commonwealth theory based on Greek ethics. *Utopia* suggests a rhetorical

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16 Frederic Jameson, “Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?”, *Science Fiction Studies*, 9 1982, p. 147
symbolism which is, when seen from a Roman perspective, its Greek advice looks like ‘nonsense’. But, for More, that ‘nonsense’ yields the ‘best state of a commonwealth’.19

Another mimetic symbolism in Utopia that has one foot in More’s reality is his defense of religious freedom to promote civic peace in Christendom and to help unify his fractious Catholic Church. In doing so, he sets forth a plan for managing church-state relations that is a precursor to liberal approaches in this area. Indeed, the origins of modern religious freedom in Protestant theology and its first mature articulation are located in Locke’s A Letter on Toleration. Nevertheless, Utopia shows that modern religious freedom has Catholic, Renaissance roots. The symbolic utopian religious freedom attempts to consider the much vexed question of whether More actually favored this principle. It also presents the historical context for More’s analysis, his rationale for religious freedom, its effects on utopian religion and politics. This strategy for promoting religious reform in Europe is expanded upon in this statement:

“The ‘radical’ interpretation of Utopia takes Utopian communism very seriously indeed, viewing the second book of More’s work as a blueprint for the ideal society; on the other hand, what might be called the ‘conservative’ school of opinion sees the work as a delightful trifle that should be valued primarily for its witty satire on Western Europe, but which is by no means to be viewed as offering a concrete program for social reform”.20

Utopia engulfs a socialist vision and to a considerable extent a Marxist socialist vision far in advance of its time. Indeed, Marxist works and thoughts provide the reader with practical presuppositions of an ideal state. Marx constructed a link between economics and intellectual sphere. The Marxist theory generates a dialectic image to a divided society in two parts, so to speak, the economic “Base” and “Superstructure”. The economic base has a corresponding superstructure which consists of social, political and cultural dimensions of human life. Marx claims that: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”21 More’s Utopia, therefore, seems to be located within the history of Britain and its accompanying development of a British national consciousness. From a Marxist reading the book seems to be a precursor articulation of communism in a practical form as it provides a clear denunciation of feudal society.

However, More’s political and economic opinions make the reader wonder if he himself is against common ownership of property. The polemical conflict between these two factions show how in the context of the modern world, there is a discrepancy between the assumed proportions of ideological heritage: the humanist beliefs and the Christian ethics.22 In this

context, More creates a rhetorical image which corroborates an idealistic nation based on an egalitarian government. His spokesperson, Hythlod, describes and evaluates utopian politics and social values, including attitudes toward money, work, land ownership, punishment of crime, and poverty. This mimetic symbolism delivers to the reader can many parallels between Utopian society and the sociopolitical structure in 16th-century England during the reign of King Henry VIII. The reader may also discern More’s attitude toward his contemporary political situations as well as social laws and customs in Tudor England. For instance, the author refers to the dangers of enclosures (which inevitably led to poverty, unemployment, and crime), the unfairness of capital punishment for theft, the problems that might ensue from the foreshadowing emergence of capitalism, and the inequitableness of the wide disparity that existed between the wealthy and the poor. However, More speaks about the mitigation of evil rather than cures it. He mixes the two perspectives of a mimetic symbolism of 16th-century England and a rhetorical symbolism of an idealistic and fictitious nation (Utopia), whose the exact location is unknown: “For it didn’t occur to us to ask, nor to him (Hythloday) to say”, (Utopia, 35), his ideas and work of art transcend time and are thus valid in today’s society.

These mimetic images included in Utopia have grown the problematic dilemma of its interpretation which is armed with suspicion concerning the amalgam between the explicit argumentation and the rhetorical symbolism in the text. It explores the hypothesis that the work is primarily and generically a conscious and consistent work of satire.23 This satiric approach has inevitably generated a good deal of controversy in critical circles, denying as it does the basic assumption of Catholic and Marxist critics alike that Utopia is essentially and fundamentally a serious socio-philosophical document tinged only occasionally with topical satire.

This model operates from “the premise that satire is a discursive practice”. (Simpson, 2003: 8) Satire requires a genus, which is a derivation in a particular culture, in a system of institutions and in the frameworks of belief and knowledge which envelop and embrace these institutions (Ibid). It also requires an impetus, which emanates from a perceived disapprobation, by the satirist, of some aspect of a potential satirical target (Ibid). As a “discursive practice”, satire is configured as a triad embodying three discursive subject positions which are subject to constant shift and (re)negotiation. These are the satirist (the producer of the text), the satiree (an addressee (whether reader, viewer or listener) and the satirized (the target attacked or critiqued in the satirical discourse). This target is “what provides the initial impetus for satire.” (Simpson, 8) With satire and the intrusion of an ironic vein, the ambiguity and the desire to escape from the reality towards the fictional/utopian world, the hermeneutic complexity of More’s text comes to the fore. This procedure allows elucidating the referential value with which the author integrates these tensions in his imaginary universe.

26), shows how his humanist ethics explore man’s existence and how the “self-image of Utopia is indeed misleading”. (Yoran, 165) The focus on the mimetic and the rhetorical dimensions encountered by the reader to understand More’s text, makes it subjugated to diverse versions of interpretations. The rhetorical symbolism is important to complete the utopian form with its utopian ethos. Consequently, it is primordial to read the text in the grain of its explicit position and against it, to be able to uncover the metaphorical traces of its repressed strains and contradictions. In the The Rule of Metaphor Ricoeur argues that because of the linguistic productive imagination meaning is generated and regenerated through the power of metaphoricity to state things in new ways.24 As a rhetorical modality, metaphor is symptomatic of the discursive interpretations of Utopia that have been laden with its diverse rhetorical and content connotations.

The utopian social order is actually based on discipline, control and supervision. The striking manifestations of this radical uniformity are shown through the Utopia’s fifty-four cities which are all set and situate alike, and in all points fashioned alike” except where geography itself makes a difference. (58) So are the “garments, which throughout all the island be one fashion (…) and this one continueth for evermore unchanged, no let to the moving and wielding of the body, also fit both for winter and summer”. (66) The examples are numerous to be cited and all of them prove that the radical change remains at the level of dismantling the social distinctions and differences. They show a tendency to abolish the private property and aristocracy, but goes further to eliminate the differences and distinctions between the citizens that are not directly linked to the social problems (to choose the dress color or to express individuality). These insights are contradictory to the humanist intellectual premises and to the rhetorical image of Utopia itself, which is committed to epitomize the welfare of its citizens.

The combination between the postmodern intrinsic and extrinsic readings of Utopia attribute to the genre the “best” means to offer some reasonable assumptions about external reality and human nature. As a literary genre Utopia has conveyed an ideological issue through an unusual destiny for its literary form. Just as the literary value of its form is subject to permanent doubt, also its literary ethos is also ambiguous. The fluctuations of its rhetorical discursiveness do nothing to resolve this variability. Obviously, it is also not a matter of taste or individual judgment:

More’s Utopians are peace-loving people, but their land was born to controversy. Many claim it: Catholic and Protestants, medievalists and moderns, socialists and communists; and a well-known historian has recently turned it over to the Nazis. Methods of legitimating claims vary widely, although most are necessarily based upon ideological interpretations of More’s book.25

More combines the disparate ideological imagery with the textual representation that holds to a fluctuating rhetorical symbolism. Utopia, therefore, transcends the mimetic representation of reality through its rhetorical discursiveness. This gap between “the rhetoric of the text and the reality it depicts is an indication of a repressed problem (…) Utopia is not happy, to say

the least, with a disruption of the routine pattern of life”. (Yoran, 168) This contradiction between the explicit representation of the utopian reality and the rhetorical discursiveness of Utopia is one of the most interpretive zone that illustrate the profound hermeneutic dilemma. These ambiguities must be accounted for and elaborated so that the textual aporias and contradictions should be related to humanist discourse.

Partly through the diachronic analysis of the text and the synchronic analysis of More’s exegeses as a humanist thinker, postmodern criticism accounts for circumstances that determine the literary ethos of the work of art. Attributing to Utopia this hermeneutic dilemma is subsequently generated through its “emphasis on fantasy (which) is paradoxically combined, as in modern science fiction, with an emphasis on realism” (Utopia, 1965: 9). In this context, Raphael Hythloday, for example, or: “Raphael Nonsenso is introduced into a genuinely autobiographical passage describing More’s visit to Flanders in 1515, and tells his story in the presence of Peter Giles, who was in fact the Town Clerk of Antwerp” (Utopia: 1965, 9). This bimodal symbolism fluctuating between realism and fantasy derives from its justifiable referents to reality: (characters, time, space, etc.). The foreign policy is also an illustrative example showing that the unattractive practices and institutions seem to be the price paid for the security and self-sufficiency of the commonwealth. (77-99) This all-important goal may be achieved on the expense of the freedom and the individuality of the citizens. They can be compromised to achieve the egalitarian and the stable social order.

Another rhetorical modality is linked to the utopian form theory as articulated in the influential sixteenth-century literary texts and in the pedagogical theory transmitted by the Christian ethics and the humanist project. These circumstances of the prose conception and composition illustrate very well More’s own situation, some aspects of his life and the factual condition of human nature in general. Thus the humanist writers concern themselves with:

The word and have a strong moral and political dimension; questions of authorship, of authority, of the power of rhetoric, of the responsibilities accompanying the knowledge which brings such power, were urgent in the increasingly secular world which Erasmus and More and their fellows addressed with such anxiety that the spirit should not be lost to the letter, or the conceptual be buried beneath the material. (Utopia, Penguin xiv)

More’s Utopia seems to be fully appreciated because of the formative influence this activity had on humanism. Utopian moral philosophy does not hold to the fact that human nature is intrinsically evil, or even that men and women are more inclined to evil than to good. It goes beyond the human essence investigation to reveal some latent premises peculiar to the English humanism. Vanity, for instance, is assumed to be the root of evil. Yet, it is extrinsic to the human nature i.e., a product of specific social environment. This hermeneutic dilemma is a result of the contingent product of historical and social forces diffused in a utopian world. The collective destiny imagined by the humanist reformer can be deduced by the reader in contrast to an aristocratic mode of thought, which advocated individualism, imperialism and the inductive authorial voice. Consequently, this text is so often taken to be the expression of ideological opinions (linked to politics, religion and economy) that there is something to be said for redressing it to a resolutely formalist way. Thus, It is not only the social and historical raw materials of the Utopian construct which are of interest from this perspective, but also the
representational relations established between them, as it is shown above: closure, narrative and ellipses or inversion. This claim is one of the components of Derrida’s Deconstruction stating that language is much more slippery and ambiguous than we realize. It is not transparent (the use the figures of speech and idioms…). Language is by nature rhetorical and this fact denies the possibility of a straightforward, literal and referential use of language. The mental life consists not of concepts but of fleeting, continually changing play of signifiers.  

In *Utopia* the rhetorical symbolism is most revealing of what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not act on the narrative apparatus. If there is general consensus on *Utopia*’s central theme, noteworthy, is the range of opinions concerning More’s position in the controversy. Was he joyously playing with both satirical and hence absurd claims? Though *Utopia* is often considered to be a reflection on the conflict between the ‘ancient’ and the ‘modern’ worlds, yet, the seeming contradictions in the book unveil that it is interpreted as either concerned with egalitarian/liberty or as its opposite, ‘totalitarianism’. It is precisely this crafty perspective that yields utopia’s philosophical/rhetorical lustre. More uses contradictions on purpose in order to achieve the fictionality of its hermeneutic dilemma, even if this is built on reality. There is, thus, for the reader, an early test of judgment to confirm the credibility of the narrative, and on the other hand, to undermine that assurance with broad hints at its fictionality. Governing the contribution of such items to the structure and purpose of More’s book is, in fact, a process by which the reader, as the recipient of an instructive/ diverting experience, is led on the realm of moving from illusion to opinion, to belief. This aims at examining progress and, inevitably, denying absolute knowledge. The reader discovers at times with amusement and sometimes with dismay, what slender evidence decides his acceptance of reality or fiction. He is torn between the two codes of the factual and the fictional that meant to attain his amusement and interest:

> *Utopia* presents two distinct worlds that occupy the same textual space while insisting upon the impossibility of their doing so. We can neither separate them entirely nor bring them into accord so that the intellectual gratification of radical discontinuity is as impossible to achieve as the pleasure of wholly integrated form.

The relationship between realism and make-believe is a complex one; through the utopian realism that reveals certain natural human weakness and vices necessitate social control. For example, More justifies the impact of poverty on human conditions in England of that era which make people steal because of necessity while others work to make the aristocracy (gentlemen and noblemen) lead an idle life. More argues that the horrible punishments against the thieves should be replaced by:

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Some means whereby they might get their living, so that no man should be driven to this extreme necessity, first to steal and then to die”; “these gentlemen, I say, do not only live in idleness themselves, but also carry about with them at their tails a great flock or train of idle and loitering serving-men, which never learned any craft whereby to get their living. (Utopía, 25)

One device by which More suggests his meaning is that of literary illusory where the hermeneutic dilemma comes to the fore. Any suggested interpretation is not an act that would be disconnected with Utopia’s ethos; the literary, philosophical, rhetorical traditions express the spirit of the age. This is not a book which tells the reader what to think, it rather shows that it is necessary to think. It is full of illusive certainties and subtle doubleness. Virtue and vice are displayed through the medium of words: “the most prominent words here are those expressing the concepts of “nobility, magnificence, worship, honour, and majesty”. It is in “the common opinion” that these are “the true ornaments and honours … of a commonwealth”. (Utopia: 1965, xxiii) The reader’s responsibility is to decipher the distinction between morality and reality: the ideal abstractions and earthly adaptations, compromises, corruptions, abuses and misuses, resolve (not reduce) complexity into simplicity. Then, they reform “the common opinion” which all humanity must share to understand any project to move on the structural/rhetorical poetics of social forms in order to achieve the ‘best state of a commonwealth’.

In the ultimate analysis, the structural/rhetorical interpretations show how More exposes himself to his reader through the parallelism between reality and expectations. This outlines the main features and the major axes explored in this paper to study the dilemma that evinces to the hermeneutic facets of More’s Utopia. The structural modalities of literature and its rhetorical reading paradigms were taken into account. The structural/rhetorical symbolic meanings operate in the ideal state and its antinomies:

The moral authority which it possesses derives not so much from its compelling subject-matter as from its literary method, which has been artfully designed so as to insist at every turn on the necessity of active, scrupulous and skeptical interpretation. Its status as a ‘classic’, therefore, stems from the fact that its appearance marked the advent of genuinely new possibilities for both the reading and the writing of literature. 29

More’s Utopia like many masterpieces, has always been and will always remain an elusive work confronted with such a diffuse material. Ultimately, this study suggests that though innumerable perspectives are applied on the work, all of which fail to claim definiteness. The wider history of More’s thought and life is reflected in Utopia which expresses the English humanist vision of society and reflects conscious ethical and worldly tensions. It is ironic, however, that the author of Utopia describes how the Neo-Platonist vision of theocracy came to be executed by theocracy. Most importantly, the man, appeared to have special talent for representation and reflection, giving the impression that at times we ourselves are living in utopia.

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