LITERATURE

THE ISLAND AND THE VISION: ENGLISH RENAISSANCE APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF PERFECTION

FERNANDO de MELLO MOSER

University of Lisbon

We may as well begin by recalling Hamlet's so often quoted lines:

> What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals.

That they contain a commonplace of the age is unquestionable; that the character who speaks them quickly sets that commonplace aside on the grounds of the personal experience he is going through need not concern us here; that they represent an assumption rooted far back in the medieval tradition is almost certainly irrelevant; but that they represent a major strain in the way of thinking of Renaissance humanism is very much to our purpose.

It is true that man continued to be considered, just as before, "a proud, and yet a wretched thing",[1] but while the Reformers tended to be obsessed by the corruption of man, the major humanists preferred, in the wake of Pico della Mirandola, to emphasize the dignity of man:

> O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills.
>
> (Cassirer et al. 1948:225

The delicate balance between the two strains could not endure the urgency of the demands on either side, and the Erasmus-Luther controversy over free will in 1524—25 brought the tension to a head, though some did remain, like Sir John Davies quoted earlier, who were able to remember simulta-

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[1] Sir John Davies, "Nosce Teipsum" (1599) — quotation from Bullett (1947: 350).

neously the obverse and the reverse in the twofold concept of man:

> I know the heavenly nature of my mind,
> But 'tis corrupted both in wit and will.
> I know my Soul hath power to know all things,
> Yet is she blind and ignorant in all;
> I know I am one of Nature's little kings,
> Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.

(Bullett 1947:350)

These lines read more like being the heirs of Geneva than of Florence, but later in the same poem, addressing himself to the "great Maker of mankind", Sir John Davies writes:

> Thou leav'st Thy print in other works of Thine
> But Thy whole image Thou in Man hast writ;
> There cannot be a creature more divine
> Except, like Thee, it should be infinit.

(Bullett 1947:382)

The strain with which we are concerned in this paper, as the subtitle indicates, is that of belief in the dignity of man, in his capacity to be whatever he wills, including to achieve perfection. Towards perfection, in fact, was written a great deal of literature throughout the 16th century that aimed directly at offering guidance for an education towards completeness — a literature in which Sir Thomas Elyot's *The book of the governor*, of 1531, and Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *The book of the courtier*, of 1561, figure prominently, but which was also to include the allegorical epic of the Elizabethan Age, Spenser's *Faerie queene*, the "generall end" of which was "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline".[2]

From the viewpoint here adopted, the problem of perfection underwent such significant changes of approach and assumptions during the 17th century as to make it impossible to review them in this paper. Thus, for our purposes, and in view of the works discussed below, the English Renaissance is to be understood as from the time when More published his *Utopia* (1516) to the year when Francis Bacon died (1626) leaving his *New Atlantis* incomplete.

Not all the possible approaches to perfection will receive our attention: with the preachers who taught roads to perfection we will not meddle. To practise perfection was something that Sir Thomas More, his circle, and the most representative Elizabethans all did, though in considerably different ways. To point towards perfection, and using an island as central image — holding as it were a mirror up to Nature — that will be the common denominator we shall start from, in More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Hence the title: *The island and the vision*.

[2] Edmund Spenser's letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, dated 23 January 1589.

It was only natural, after all, that *the island* should have gained particular importance as image, metaphor, and allegory during the period of a little over one hundred years after the more spectacular Portuguese and Spanish maritime discoveries, when the imaginary voyage had every opportunity of verisimilitude, while the English were more conscious than ever of being islanders, and in Elizabethan times proud islanders, at that. Their geography may not have been strictly accurate, in so far as they apparently identified England with Britain, but to them England was

> This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
> This fortress built by nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall,
> Or as a moat defensive to a house,
> Against the envy of less happier lands. (...)
> This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

(*Richard II*: II, i, 40—50)

Shakespeare wrote these lines for John of Gaunt to point out the degeneracy of Richard II, and in the play they represent the reality that is threatened. But at another level they represent the dream-vision of, almost, a sort of Utopia: "this other Eden, demi-paradise" — the land of Gloriana-Elizabeth, but also the land of Gloriana beyond Elizabeth or, if you like, the Idea of England, and England as she at her best *could* be, or at least *might* be.

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, in a sense, belongs — if the introduction of a pet distinction may be allowed — to the Renaissance in England rather than to the English Renaissance. For one thing, it was written in Latin, not in English. It belongs to what C. S. Lewis called the "Drab", as against the "Golden" Age that followed. It is cosmopolitan, universal, unique in many ways; and yet, it is also very decidedly English in many ways. For it is the expression of the mind of an Englishman, aware and concerned about the social problems of England, and offering as food for thought the vision of the island of Utopia: a profoundly witty, an earnestly witty intellectual challenge.

Not least among *Utopia*'s claims to uniqueness is the peculiar fact that it is at once more medieval and more modern than other works: medieval, for example, in its debt to monastic institutions, more modern in its concept of a classless society and, as against contemporary and later works, in its characteristically urban viewpoint — no doubt the product of More's birth, life and active citizenship as a Londoner. Set in the age of maritime travel and

discovery in which it was written, it has been shown to possess a quality of timelessness or, more exactly, a for-all-timeness, just as the Nowhere has caught attention Everywhere.

The *New Atlantis*, on the other hand, is a book written with eyes turned to the future, it is indeed prophetic as regards scientific achievement, and yet, from another point of view, that of the structure of the society as implied in the fragment, it dates very neatly, a product of the High Renaissance in England. Thus, it is early modern rather than modern, and hardly our contemporary at all, despite the role assigned in it to science. But it is in many ways a fitting landmark standing at a turning point: at the end of the age of courtiers who believed in perfect performance as an expression of true perfection, and lived and died — even on the scaffold — by this creed; and at the gates of the world of observation, experiment, induction, and the high road to scientific progress.

"Comparisons are odious" is an old saying which in the interests of scholarship we are not always able to follow. No real comparison can, in fact, be made between *Utopia* and *New Atlantis*, since the latter remained unfinished, and it is not much use speculating on what Bacon might have intended to devote his attention to. The two works as they stand have, beyond *the island and the vision*, very little in common, for even the goodness of the inhabitants raises different questions in the two works. Thus, each one of these two will be considered here as an individual approach to the problem of perfection, and the characteristically different viewpoints of each are too well-known to require corroboration for the greatly summarizing statements that will be made.

More's *Utopia* could well be described as a Book for All Seasons, however much it may have been, and still be, greatly misunderstood. It can be looked at and appreciated from many different points of view, and not least, here, because it was written by one of the acknowledged and informed English admirers of John Picus, Earl of Mirandola, as well as the friend and twin-mind of the author of the *Essay on free will*. More was, thus, one who believed that, in one sense, man can be whatever he wills. But in order to choose wisely and rightly he must be educated to follow the ways of Reason and not the ways of Folly. It has been said that *Utopia* is the *Praise of reason* to Erasmus's *Praise of folly*, which is true up to a point: both books, after all, hold a mirror up to nature — and Folly is no less depicted in Book One of *Utopia* than in the passages against abuse of power and wealth in the work of the author of the *Adagia*; ultimately, both Erasmus and More believed in that nobler Reason, which makes man practically infinite in faculties, as later the Elizabethans were still to believe.

In More's *Utopia*, the political approach to perfection is explicit in the very title: *De optimo reipublicae statu*, or *the best state of a commonwealth*.

Raphael's discourse does not describe a community of saints but a community of men: yet, it is a community engendering a majority of *perfect* citizens, and this, inevitably, by means of their total education: *Leges habent perquam paucas, sufficiunt enim sic institutis paucissimae* — "they have very few laws because very few are needed for persons so educated".[3] There is also, of course, great emphasis on the suppression of stimuli towards negative behaviour, and that is where utopian communism comes in, but the role of education in the full sense of the word is absolutely paramount as, after all, one would expect from the greatest figure of Christian Humanism in England.

A good deal of nonsense has been written concerning the discovery of the individual as an achievement of the Renaissance, for the expression requires to be carefully qualified in several ways. Here in *Utopia*, at any rate, the individual and the happiness of the individual matter greatly, but the individual is still seen, primarily, as an organically integrated being, the member of a community. No doubt this would still be an assumption later, as Shakespeare's plays clearly show, but in More it was the expression of a consistent ideal.[4]

In *New Atlantis* as we have it — lacking, at least, that "frame of laws" the author intended to write, according to Rawley's note to the Reader — the approach to perfection follows the way of Science. The obvious kernel of the work lies in the description of Solomon's House: "The end of our foundation", says the father of Solomon's House, "is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (*New Atlantis*: 33). Here, then, the vision concerns man's practically unlimited progress in the beneficent control of Nature. It is a fitting message for *the* true herald of the scientific revolution, and it is complete, on its own terms, as far as the message is concerned.

Looking at *New Atlantis* as a description of an ideal commonwealth, on the other hand, it is bound to appear uncritical regarding the structure of the society of its own times. The fallen Lord Chancellor was no doubt a greater conformist in that respect than the earlier author who, when writing *Utopia*, was yet to become, and cease to be, Lord Chancellor.

The natural goodness of the Utopians, whether representing a prelapsarian state of some sort or simply human nature ready to be built upon by grace, has given rise to much discussion, and it certainly seems to say to European Christians: shame on you! But the basic fallacy of the Bensalem vision is the assumption of the wisdom, the ethical wisdom especially, of the intelligentsia. Inevitably, both the ways are subject to the respective distortion

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[3] *The Yale edition of the complete works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4: *Utopia*, p. 194.

[4] I have dealt with this in an article, in Portuguese: "O ideal comunitário de Thomas More", in *Brotéria* (Lisbon), 1975, 303—316.

and corruption: Utopia, to become the tyranny of the state; Bensalem, to become the slave to technology, instead of the fosterer of science — both to turn a Brave New World into all but an illusion. Nevertheless, both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* aimed at *perfect* societies, not at the reverse, and they belong to an age that was conscious — we may even add, *responsibly* conscious — that the proper development of the individual, and his happiness even, depend on his being socially integrated, at one with the community. For, in the never too often remembered words of another major figure of that time, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main".[5]

The island and the vision in both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* aim towards perfection in society, to a great extent *through* society even, as we saw in the case of *Utopia* especially, and therefore implicitly partake of John Donne's attitude: "No man is an island". Yet, the very opposite has also been stated, namely, that every man is an island, in pure denial of the contrary.[6] But, in point of fact, both statements are asymptotically true, as the thinkers and writers of the English Renaissance were well aware of, and expressed under the forms of mutual reaction or reciprocal effects between man-the-microcosm and the body politic. Hence the need to strive for perfection both in the commonwealth and in man.

The approach to perfection in the attention given to complete education and to public behaviour with the "perfect courtier" as goal we have alluded to already. Our attention must now be focussed on the *inner* perfection of man, the microcosm.

In passing, reference should be made to the fact that *Utopia* has been found susceptible,[7] of a reading at spiritual level, whereas here it has been considered at, let us say, "face value". The *New Atlantis*, however, cannot be read in such manner, and perhaps that, too, is significant in respect of the age when each work was written.

The perfection of the inner man begins, of course, with the pursuit of self-knowledge: hence the peculiar significance of Sir John Davies's poem

[5] John Donne, *Devotions* (1624): "Meditation XVII".

[6] I am grateful to Mrs Kaske, of Cornell, for reminding me, during the period of discussion following the delivery of this paper at the IAUPE Congress, in August 1977, of one very good example of the statement that every man is an island (though not explicitly contradicting Donne), in a poem by Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite": "Yes! in the sea of life enisled/ With echoing straits between us thrown,/ Dotting the shoreless watery wild,/ We mortal millions live *alone*./ The islands feel the enclasping flow,/ And then their endless bounds they know".

[7] See, for example, John X. Evans (1977) — which I was kindly allowed to read in typescript through the courtesy of the Abbé Germain Marc'hadour, International Secretary of the *Amici Thomae Mori* Association. See also the recently published bilingual (Latin-French) *Utopia*, ed. and intr. by André Prévost, notably Part II, section iv.

"Nosce Teipsum", from which we have already quoted. A true heir of those humanists who have been said to have practically canonized Socrates, to whom the *Know thyself!* maxim was attributed, the poet wrote:

> the wisest of all mortal men
> Said he knew nought but that he nought did know:
> And the great mocking master mockt not then,
> When he said truth was buried deep below.
>
> For how may we to others' things attain
> When none of us his own soul understands?
> For which the Devil mocks our curious brain
> When 'Know thyself' his oracle commands.
>
> (Bullett 1947:347)

Even the more Geneva inclined would agree with the maxim, though not as an approach and path to perfection, but as a means to achieve humility.

Through suffering to self-knowledge and humility is a theme that we find in more than one of Shakespeare's tragedies, and very particularly in *King Lear*. We can only guess at the audiences' reactions: from sheer awe, in some, to the "there but for the grace of God go I",[8] in others, to the consideration, in those inclined to the language of alchemy, that self-knowledge is an absolute prerequisite for the transmutation of the soul.

The transmutation from the baser to the higher self is something *The tempest* is certainly about, whatever else it may be about. And that transmutation is tested in the opportunity to forgive and forget. Thus Prospero:

> Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,
> Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
> Do I take part: the rarer action is
> In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,
> The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
> Not a frown further.
>
> (V,i, 25–30)

In *The tempest* we find an island where one vision comes upon another, for the audience and for the characters, as if all were trapped inside a set of magic mirrors — for mirrors they still are. For the characters it becomes difficult to distinguish vision from reality, and reality from hallucination, as when Alonso finds his supposedly lost son, and says:

> If this prove
> A vision of the island, one dear son
> Shall I twice lose.
>
> (V,i, 175–7)

It is because a transmutation of some sort has taken place that Miranda

[8] I have borrowed the sentence from Roy W. Battenhouse (1969), which should not be taken to mean an acceptance of his interpretation of the moral significance of the plays, particularly as regards individual characters.

can truthfully explain:

> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
> That has such people in it!
>
> (V,i, 183—4)

To the audience, aware of the "baseless fabric of the vision", it might well occur that

> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself

would, in time, "leave not a rack behind". But, as long as life runs its course, the way to perfection lies in a path through self-knowledge to the achievement of personal talents, controlled by the nobler reason, and not selfishly, but in the interests of the community.

In a very real sense, Lear *found himself* on the heath. In *The tempest* the storm was part not of a tragic vision but of a vision in a totally different mood: a vision towards joy.[9] Thus, the summing up by the faithful Gonzalo — which suggests a great deal more than it is possible to examine here —:

> O, rejoice
> Beyond a common joy!

for many things happened to the several characters involved, "in one voyage" and "in a poor isle", but they are all described by means of the verb *to find*:

> in one voyage
> Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis;
> And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
> Where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom
> In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves
> When no man was his own.

And, with this quotation, I will put down my book.

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[9] For a few hints concerning "joy" in Shakespearian comedy, see my 1976—7 article "A reappraisal of *The merchant of Venice*".