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« RESOURCES OF KIND » IN *A DIALOGUE OF COMFORT*

As Rosalie Colie pointed out in *The Resources of Kind* (Berkeley : Univ. California Press, 1973, pp. 76-102), the dialogue – like the history, the utopia and the other *nova reperta* favored by the humanists – is free of the Aristotelian and Horatian canons that confined the kinds of poetry and drama. The dialogue, like the rest, invites digression, excursus, and the imitation of other kinds, whether literary, sub-literary or extraliterary. Certainly any reader of More's *Dialogue of Comfort* recognizes what Colie would call its « uncanonical » and « inclusionistic » character. Much of the apparent randomness of the *Dialogue* may be traced to this generic characteristic.[1] While the number of kinds represented in the *Dialogue* is great, each of the three books takes one kind as its key-note, and Antony governs the change from one kind to another. Thus, in Book I, Antony's manner echoes the style and approach of the theological treatise, useful for the exposition of faith but wearisome in conversation. At the beginning of Book II, his radical change in manner announces a shift to the kinds typical of sermons : the *exemplum*, the *narracio*, the beast-fable. Written models for these kinds abound in homiletic handbooks, as, for example, in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* (ed. E. H. Weatherley, EETS OS 200 [London, 1936], or Mirk's *Festial* (ed. T. Erbe, EETS OS 96 [London, 1905]), but Antony's manner seems to fall between the formality of the handbooks and the casual vigor of a spoken sermon : the stories he tells draw their energy from their consonance with actual utterance, and their appearance in the text is dictated by present need rather than by formal constraint. In Book III, Antony turns inward to concentrate upon persecution for the faith and its dominant image of the suffering Christ; once more the key-note changes, and Antony's style echoes the tone, manner, and development of handbooks on meditation like Kempis's *Imitation*. This last modulation seems intended to direct the reader beyond the *Dialogue* toward the *Treatise on the Passion* (Martz, *CW*, 12, lxxvi-lxxxvi). With Antony and Vincent's parting words the dialogue ends, but Vincent's decision to transcribe and to translate the whole suggests that the real benefit of this « good counsel » is yet to come, in the strength and « profit » that others will take from it. The *Dialogue* ends, that is, on an open chord that reverberates in eternity, where « God [will] bring us together again, either here or in heaven » (III.27, p. 326). [2]

One mark of More's mastery in the dialogue-kind is the care with which these three formal key-notes are harmonized. In one sense, his use of other kinds in the dialogue is predicted in Antony's telling phrase at the end of the preface to Book I : « And herein shall I be glad (as my poor wit will serve me) to call to mind with you, such things as I before have read, heard, or thought upon, that may conveniently serve us to this purpose [of comfort against tribulation] » (p. 9). The three participles name the actions appropriate to audiences of the kinds that the dialogue offers in succession : reading a treatise, hearing a sermon, thinking upon a meditation. In Antony's concluding words, these three actions are recalled once more : « I beseech our Lord to breathe of his Holy Spirit into the reader's breast, which inwardly may teach him in heart, without whom little availeth all that all the mouths of the world were able to teach in men's ears » (III.27, p. 326). One human being can offer another little through reading and hearing unless the Holy Spirit teaches him inwardly through meditation. Since no generic canon dictates the order or variety of kinds included in a dialogue, the work itself must justify their use through the nature of each kind and the reader's expectations of it.

In the *Dialogue*, More moves from « closed » to « open » kinds, as the three participles suggest and as the movement of the whole dialogue proves. By its nature, the treatise-kind is a « closed » form : it attempts to be systematic and comprehensive, leaving nothing unanswered or unexplained. This attempt at comprehensiveness gives the *Summa Theologica* its grandeur – and its failure gives Aquinas' « *videatur mihi ut palea* » a special poignancy. Even at the lower level of completeness that Antony attempts in his disquisition on faith, the closure of the treatise-kind makes its consolation remote and chilly. By the end of the book, as Vincent observes, Antony has yet to prove « the most profitable point of tribulation » (p. 79). The treatise-kind and its demand for orderly exposition are at odds with the immediacy of Vincent's need.[3]

Vincent's humble recognition at the end of Book I – « you have even showed me a sample of sufferance in bearing my folly so long and patiently » (p. 79) – might easily be turned upon Antony himself, as he appears to recognize at the beginning of Book II (pp. 81-83), exactly the point at which his manner changes so remarkably, in the story of the nun and her brother, the first of the « merry tales » that fill Book II. Antony becomes more human here, characterizing himself as « a fond

old man...with a cup and a roasted crab and drivel and drink and talk » (pp. 81-82), less the magisterial figure « so learned in the law of God » (I.Pref., p. 3) whom he appears to be in Vincent's eyes. He turns to the questions most immediately at hand, illustrating them by the *exempla* that suit the matter. By their nature, these anecdotes are the opposite of the treatise-kind : they are not comprehensive but open to the occasion, illustrating a particular point without necessary reference to what comes before or after, a sort of hearsay appropriate to the moment. Antony signals his change in tone – and the change in kind to be followed through most of Book II – by a set of stories and allusions significantly drawn from preaching. In the last of this set, Antony tells of a preacher who saw his congregation asleep and « suddenly said unto them, 'I shall tell you a merry tale.' At which word they lifted up their heads and hearkened » (II.1, p. 87).[4] The anecdote demonstrates in little what becomes true for the remainder of the *Dialogue* : the preacher sees a problem and solves it, at the same time recognizing the merely human weakness that is its cause. « He dissembled [i.e., pretended not to notice] their sleeping » : here is the awakened human sympathy that Antony shows throughout the remainder, the realization that human needs cannot be met by treatises, however comprehensive. In the anecdote the preacher's recognition of human frailty establishes a paternal relationship between him and his congregation, reflecting the new and more nearly equal relationship between Antony and Vincent, which persists throughout the second book.

The structural modifications that the meditation-kind requires have been fully described elsewhere (Martz, *CW*, 12, lxxvi-lxxix; Manley, *CW*, 12, civ-cxvii). The pattern of reiteration that More uses, first with the word *pavice* and then with the image of the crucified Christ appears superficially to be circular : every departure brings a return to the origin. Especially in the latter case, however, this appearance of circularity deceives : the intellectual motion of the third book is an ascending spiral, and the recurrence of the image of the Passion is dialectical, leading or driving the reader to meditation. In part, this dialectical recurrence is accomplished by amplification. Occasional early references to the Passion grow finally to the longest and most powerful evocation in the last chapter, much as the pavice enlarges to cover successively greater ranges of human vulnerability. Neither the pavice imagery nor the evocation of the Passion emerges abruptly : the pavice first occurs in the beginning of the exposition of Psalm 90 (II.11), and Antony refers to the Passion as early as the tenth chapter of the first book. The

images upon which the meditation operates are thus present from early on, and the process of their gradual appearance and final dominance are in part a reflection of the whole dialectical process that leads to God, a process that begins before the believer is aware of it. The spiralling ascent finally transcends both the closure of the treatise-kind and the more open but discontinuous *exemplum* and anecdote of Book II. For the reader as for Vincent, this gradual approach to meditation means gradually increasing activity (implied by the three participles of Antony's early phrase) and changing responsibility as an audience. As reading is more passive than hearing, and hearing more passive than « thinking upon, » so does the responsibility of the audience shift from that of pupil to a human teacher (however sanctified or venerable), to the relative equality of a hearer of tales, to the final openness of a believer willing to be instructed by the Holy Spirit and the breath of that inspiration. By the end of the *Dialogue*, the kinds represented in each of the three books seem also to be related to the faculties of mind with which each is most concerned – the reason, the senses, and the will – and each kind plays its part to complete the exposition of the theological virtues that govern the *Dialogue* (Manley, *CW*, 12, lxxxvi-cxvii).

A Dialogue of Comfort shows us again two qualities that mark More as an author : his literary finesse and his religious insight. The ample freedom of the dialogue form allows his readers both to distinguish the models on which he draws and to recognize the result as a peculiarly successful original work. Complementing this literary success is a humility that takes nothing to itself, that makes no claim to have solved the problem of comfort against tribulation, but that instead releases the reader to « think upon » the true solution outside and independent of the *Dialogue*. Antony seems to speak from More's experience when he recognizes human weakness : « he that cannot long endure to hold up his head and hear talking of heaven, except he be now and then between...refreshed with a foolish merry tale, there is none other remedy, but you must let him have it. Better would I wish it but I cannot help it » (II.1. p. 88). With this truth, perhaps not so negatively stated, More can justify his plundering the resources of kind. In this he has much in common with that other master of the dialogue-kind. At the end of *Republic* VI, Socrates tells his audience that thinking in images is perhaps the worst sort of thinking to use when searching for the truth – and then, recognizing the need that being merely human creates, promptly delivers the most famous « image » in all of Plato's work, the Allegory of the Cave. Like Plato, More shows throughout the *Dialogue*

that he is willing to exploit any device to remedy the weakness of human nature, shifting kindly from one means to another to secure his end. However great their differences otherwise, in their respect and sympathy for the human condition More and Plato are at one.[5]

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1. Structure and articulation are discussed at length by Louis L. Martz, « The Tower Works, » and Frank Manley, « The Argument of the Book, » in the introduction to *A Dialogue of Comfort, CW*, 12 (New Haven : Yale Univ. Press, 1976), lvii-cxx.

2. All quotations from the *Dialogue* are taken from the modernized version, ed. Frank Manley, in the Yale Selected Works (New Haven, 1977).

3. A contrasting view of the book-to-book changes may be found in J. Stephen Russell, « More's *Dialogue* and the Dynamics of Comfort, » *Moreana*, 65-66 (1980), 41-55.

4. The Yale editors note (p. 367) that this anecdote, which Antony cites as from Cassian's *Collations*, comes in fact from another of Cassian's works, where the situation and the point are considerably different. It may be that More misremembered the source; it may be that he is playing a game with the reader, perhaps to illustrate Antony's fallible humanity; or it may be that More allows Antony to fill in the outline of the story with the details and the lesson appropriate to the occasion : the practice is not unknown among preachers today.

5. Commentary about Plato's influence on the dramatic structure may be found in Walter M. Gordon, « The Platonic Dramaturgy of Thomas More's *Dialogues*, » *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 8 (1978), 193-215.

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The Winter 1980 Ampleforth Journal (LXXXV, 2) is full of St Benedict's Centenary. Cardinal Basil Hume's Westminster sermon of 11 July 1980 makes one point which Thomas More had made in Westminster Hall on 1 July 1535 : « We who live in these parts have good reason to hold in special veneration St Gregory and his monastery on the Coelian Hill ; for it was from there that St Augustine and his companions made their way to our shores in 597 » (p. 14). He goes on to mention other saints : Bede the scholar, « Boniface the prototype of the missionary monk..., Anselm the ecclesiastical dignitary concerned