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TRUTH AND FICTION IN *A DIALOGUE OF COMFORT*.

Although the *Utopia* has traditionally been seen as More's literary masterpiece, the publication of his *Complete Works* has drawn attention to the literary qualities of his other works, notably *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*. The occasion of the writing has its own dramatic appeal : More alone in the Tower of London, awaiting probable execution, necessarily reflecting on his life and the significance of his impending death. Although the subject is devotional, the book is not weighted with doctrinal disputes as are the polemical works, nor is it as didactic as his earlier treatise, the *Four Last Things*. [1] In fact, as R.S. Sylvester asserts, *A Dialogue of Comfort* may be More's most fully realized work of fiction, « the best dialogue More ever wrote. » [2] If the conversation at first seems rambling and digressive, the digressions are part of a growing pattern of meaning, as Louis Martz demonstrated in his important essay on the work's design. [3] Martz and Manley both testified to the work's artistry in their introductions to the Yale edition.

Its quality is certainly related to its complexity, for the three sections of the book weave a rich tapestry of scriptural commentary, devotional meditation, and subtle literary play. To try to separate any single strand for analysis is to risk marring the whole. Yet it may be useful to trace connections between a central theme -- the nature of truth -- and the literary devices which express it. The quest for truth in troubled times is assisted, paradoxically enough, by fictions : an exotic setting ; imaginary characters who try on different roles ; a complex use of figurative language.

The subject of *A Dialogue* is the meaning of human suffering and the issue of persecution for the faith, but More avoids absolute identification with his own imprisonment and impending martyrdom by distancing the work in both place and time. It is set in Hungary in the years 1527/28 on the eve of a Turkish invasion that threatens not only that country but all of Christendom. The sense of distance is heightened with the information that this is a dialogue « made by an Hungarian in Latin, and translated out of Latin into French, and out of French into English. » [4]

This fictional framework is not new to More ; in fact, it links the Tower writing of 1534 to the *Utopia* of 1516. In the earlier work, More's thoughts on the best state of the commonwealth were cast in the mouth of persona More and Raphael Hythloday ; in the later work, his thoughts on the best state of the soul were cast in the mouth of an old Hungarian,

Antony, and his young « cousin » Vincent. But Antony and Vincent seem to change character in the course of the three books, and these role changes serve to surprise the reader and invite him, ultimately, to a re-examination of the relationship between truth and fiction.

In the first book, Antony responds to young Vincent's questions about the reasons for suffering by assuming the role of the strict spiritual advisor whose purpose is to reverse the wordly perspectives of young Vincent, and, of course, the reader. When Vincent says that he and his kin fear to lose their faith in these troubled times, especially if the aged Antony should not be available to give advice, Antony rebukes him by saying that help comes from God alone. When Vincent bemoans the various sufferings of their family, Antony praises the value of tribulation in bringing the soul to God. It would not be going too far to see the entire first book as a tribute to the value of tribulation. Although Vincent voices very little objection to this on the whole, he does, I suspect, speak for many readers when, in the fifteenth chapter, he says,

> if it were as you say, good uncle, that perpetual prosperity were to the soul so perilous, and tribulation thereto so fruitful, then were as me seemeth every man bound of charity, not only to pray God send their neighbors sorrow, but also to help thereto themself, and when they come to comfort them they should say, « I am glad, good gossip, that ye be so sick. I pray God keep you long therein. » (p. 48-49)

Antony responds to this by stressing man's relative ignorance in regard to divine knowledge and purpose.

The central metaphor of the book reinforces this division between sensual and spiritual, human and divine. Antony calls God the Great Physician who prescribes medicine for the soul in the form of tribulation. This metaphor fosters an image of God as all powerful, superior not only to the pagan philosophers whom, as we know, More admired, but far superior to all worldly comfort and certainly to the patient himself -- ignorant, sick man. Absolute faith in divine knowledge is necessary to reverse the perspective of nature in favor of that of grace. The entire book works to make both Vincent and the reader come to accept the role of a patient whose sickness can lead to everlasting spiritual health.

If the work had ended with the first book, it would have been very little different from traditional comfort literature, and the modern reader might have only marginally more interest in *A Dialogue* than in the *Four Last Things*. But there is a dramatic change in the second section as Antony assumes a new role. Although he forbade the comfort of laughter

in the first book, saying that Christ was never seen to laugh, and that those who weep shall reach heaven before those who laugh, he now calls himself « half a giglet and more ». (p. 86) He gladly claims the part of old fool, and the word « merry » recurs a dozen times in the preface. In fact, the second book emphasizes personality as well as humor and the things of this world. Whereas Book One begins with a denial of Antony's importance as an individual, Book Two immediately calls attention to him as an individual -- his age, his temperament, his bodily needs. Vincent greets him by saying he is glad to hear that his « stomach » is somewhat come back to him, and he expresses concern that their previous conversation had wearied a man of « such great age. » But Antony assures him he enjoyed their talk, for « a fond old man is often so full of words as a woman... It is, you wot well, as some poets paint us, all the lust of an old fool's life to sit well and warm with a cup and a roasted crab and drivel and drink and talk. » (p. 82)

Then Vincent calls attention to his own personality, when he says he has been inhibited but will forbear no more to show his own folly openly. Indeed, this greater daring is shown to good effect as he vividly tells the story of a Lutheran minister who discounted good works in favor of the Passion. « Now so loud and so shirl he cried Christ in their ears, and so thick he came forth with Christ's bitter passion, and that so bitterly spoken, with the sweat dropping down his cheeks that I marveled not though I saw the poor women weep. » (p. 98) Here Vincent's eloquence offers effective parody of the notion that man can be saved by faith alone. And, in fact, the second book emphasizes man's role in salvation much more than the first.

In the second book, the human role is no longer that of passive patient, but rather that of wrestler in the game of life, actively struggling with the forces of evil. The new focus on man's part in salvation is emphasized by the way Antony, always fond of making numerical divisions and subdivisions in his argument, enumerates three kinds of tribulation in each book. In the first book, he isolated three types of « medicinable » tribulation : those sent for past sins, those sent for unknown sin or to prevent future sinning, and those sent for no known cause to cleanse the soul. The agent of these beneficial trials is clearly the Great Physician, and man is not mentioned in the division. But in the second book, Antony makes the same kind of tripartite division, which now centers on man's part, for the three kinds of tribulation are : the sort willingly undertaken, the sort willingly suffered, and finally, the sort that cannot be avoided. In each case the focus is on man's agency or response. The medical metaphor recurs, but with a difference. It is pluralized and reduced to human

dimensions, for the physician is no longer God alone but good men -- doctors of the body and spirit. Here the physician most often mentioned by Antony is the friend or spiritual counselor. There is a sense throughout Book II that man can help man, just as Antony, now clearly a person and personality in his own right (as well as an agent of God's grace) can help Vincent and his kin.

But if Antony, Vincent, and « man » all seem to adopt new roles in the second book, so does God. The divine presence is no longer prescriptive but supportive. And the simile, though scriptural in origin, is striking as More develops it :

> with how tender affection God of his great goodness longeth to gather them under the protection of his wings, and how often like a loving hen he clucketh home unto him, even those chickens that willfully walk abroad into the kite's danger... (p. 108).

However unlikely the image of God as mother hen, the maternal presence is reassuring, and the entire second book is homey, domestic, comforting in a way that is more accessible to most of us than the austere prescriptions of the Great Physician. In fact, the book abounds with familiar characters as the anecdotes testify to the multiple roles available to men --and women -- in life. The genial Antony has his counterpart in Mother Maud, whose witty fable reveals the value as well as the dangers of an « overscrupulous conscience ». A learned young woman is commended early in the book, but foolish women and men are also parodied in a series of anecdotes that find humor even in the most macabre setting.

In the midst of all these various human roles, Antony comments at length on the central biblical text, Psalm 90. [5] « The truth of God shall encompass thee about with a pavis ; thou shalt not be afeard of the night's fear, nor or the business walking about in the darkness, nor of the incursion or invasion of the devil in the midday. » (p. 109) Crucial repetitions of this text, particularly the pavis of truth image, unify the remainder of *A Dialogue*, as Louis Martz has shown. It is significant, I think, that Antony introduces the shield of truth not only with the four temptations of the Psalm, but in the thick of life as it is lived and presented in the anecdotes. The truth shall somehow protect us and save us ; it is no little buckler but a great shield that encompasses us all around, says Antony.

But, paradoxically, the truth is not easy to discern. This point is made not only by the swirling variety of life described, but also by the explicit discussion of illusion and reality that occupies several pages of the book. Vincent asks how man can know truth from illusion, and Antony

says they are as different as waking and sleeping. [6] « This is a pretty similitude, uncle, » Vincent exclaims, and then declares that it must be « easy » to distinguish « true revelation » from « false delusion » (p. 141). This seems the signal for Antony to lead Vincent on a merry chase indeed (and for More to demonstrate his delight in confusing illusion and reality.)

> Not so easy, cousin, as you ween it were. For how can you now prove unto me that you be awake ?
>
> Marry, lo, do I not now wag my hand, shake my head and stamp with my foot here in the floor ? (p. 142)

Antony responds, « Have you never dreamed ere this that you have done the same ? » (p. 142). And the full complexity of the distinction between illusion and reality, waking and sleeping, now dawns upon Vincent. Antony carries the similitude further when he asks, « And will you not now soon, trow you, when you wake and rise, laugh as well at yourself, when you see that you lie now in your warm bed asleep again, and dream all this time, while you ween so verily that you be waking and talking of these matters with me ? » (p. 142). Of course Vincent cannot prove that he is awake (and we, as readers must be aware that, after all, he exists only in More's dream) but both he and Antony agree that even though he can't prove it, he is awake and he knows it. Antony then summarizes their discussion :

> And likewise seemeth me the manner and difference between some kind of true revelations and false illusions, as it standeth between the things that are done waking and the things that in our dreams seem to be done while we be sleeping ; that is to wit, that he which hath that kind of revelation from God is as sure of the truth as we be of our own deed while we be waking, and he that is illuded by the devil is in such wise deceived and worse too, than be they by their dream, and yet reckoneth for the time himself as sure as the tother, saving that the one falsely weeneth, the tother truly knoweth. (p. 143)

In this difficult passage, Antony seems to be saying that there is a distinction between revelation and illusion, but that it is impossible to see it clearly in this world. God may send a man « sure knowledge » of the truth, Antony says. But how is any other person to know that this is sure knowledge -- and not that man's illusion ? For all the tokens men

may turn to -- fruitfulness of revelation, accordance with scripture, and with the Church -- uncertainty remains. Perhaps for More this grey area, the fantasy-filled moment between sleeping and waking, represents the condition of men on earth before they attain the reality of heaven. Surely this was Spenser's interpretation in the *Faerie Queene* more than fifty years later. In this world Una wears a veil, and the Redcrosse knight, even girded with the armor of Christian faith, will be fooled over and over again by Duessa. For Milton too, things are only what they seem before the Fall ; in *Paradise Lost,* even Milton's language must be paradoxical after Eve's fateful decision.

I suggest that More, like other great Christian poets, recognizes the necessity of feigning in a duplicitous world. For in such a world, truth can be apprehended only indirectly. And the rhetoricians give us the tools for such indirection : metaphor, irony, paradox, fictions -- the putting of cases, the playing of roles.

Since the shifting circumstances of our lives demand different modes of apprehending truth, it is fitting that Antony once again adopts a sterner mask in the third book of *A Dialogue,* which concerns open persecution (the invasion of the Turk in terms of historical setting ; the invasion of the mid-day devil in the words of Psalm 90). Vincent's questions are harder and more persistent. The domestic stories and metaphors of the preceding book disappear in favor of a harsh central metaphor : the world as prison. [7] Man, for all his « wide walking » through life is condemned to death and restricted even where he thinks he has freedom. And Antony's erstwhile Physician become the Great Jailer. He watches the prisoner, man, determining when to release him and to what reward or punishment.

Vincent, although he fears for his life and goods, objects to the view of life as imprisonment. This « similitude », he contends, is but a « sophistical fantasy ». Antony is delighted with the objection and with the increasingly independent role his « cousin » plays in this conclusion of the dialogue. He says, « if you had assented in words and in your mind departed unpersuaded, then if the thing be true that I say, yet had you lost the fruit, and if it be false and myself deceived therein, then... you should have confirmed me in my folly ». (p. 269) Then, condemning himself as an old fool, he adopts the Socratic guise, asking questions that lead Vincent inevitably to the conclusion that the world is indeed a prison. Antony enjoys his victory with an ironic statement of self-doubt :

> And now, cousin, if this thing that I tell you seem but a sophistical fantasy to your mind, I would be glad to know what moveth you so to think. For in good faith, as I have told you twice, I am no wiser but that I verily ween the thing is thus of very plain truth in very deed. (p. 277)

The complexity of apprehending truth is reintroduced here as Antony points paradoxically to the plain truth of a metaphor and goes on to emphasize its truth with the repeated emphatic « verys ».

This « fantasy » that is « very plain truth » also furthers the confusion of art and life that is so much a part of More's Tower work. Throughout the book there are numerous thinly disguised allusions to More's family and friends : Dame Alice, Margaret, and others. And of course the connections between the great Turk and Henry, More's own persecution and the expected persecution of Antony and Vincent, are obvious to anyone familiar with More's life. The prison metaphor compounds this deliberate confusion of fiction and fact, because it plays upon the author's actual imprisonment even as (through Vincent's objections) it calls attention to itself as a figure of speech. [8] Thus, as one reads the book, art and life seem to coalesce, separate, and coalesce again. The process persistently invites the reader to a reconsideration of the nature of truth. In light of the complexity of this issue, the recurring image of the pavis of truth acquires an almost ironic character. More, however, believes that the pavis of truth exists despite man's clouded vision, and that it will protect him in his most severe struggles.

Such a struggle forms the dramatic conclusion of the *Dialogue,* and,toward the end of the book, the reader is asked to don the role of soldier, or Christian knight. In a sense, all the parts played in this variable dialogue have tended toward this final battle with its emphasis on moral strength. [9] And the devil to be fought is not finally the Turk, or the heretic, or even King Henry, but the devil within. As Antony says, « with our inward eye we see him well enough and intend to stand and fight with him even hand to hand ». So, « let us fence us with faith, and comfort us with hope, and smite the devil in the face with a firebrand of charity ». (p. 324) Some of the paradoxes of role-playing in the book -- Antony as strict spiritual guide and genial old man, God as severe Physician and Mother Hen -- become more comprehensible in light of this final paradox of « smiting the devil with charity ». To develop our full strength, More seems to say, we must know discipline and suffering as well as the pleasures of friend-

ship and the sustenance of love. More's multiple fictions tend to lead us, I believe, to the knowledge of our own demons and the testing of our own strength. That is why this battle becomes the dramatic focus of the book. For the reader is asked not only to appreciate Christ's love and sacrifice but to don the power of that love himself, in preparation for his own struggle.

The battle is not easy, of course. And, after involving us in it, Antony is quite exhausted. The last great part played, he seems able once again to admit his humanity. Remembering the promise of heavenly joy as reward for the last great victory, he says,

> And therefore I pray you let the consideration of that joy put out all worldly trouble out of your heart, and also pray that it may do the same in me. And even thus will I, good cousin, with these words make a sudden end of mine whole tale and bid you farewell. For now I begin to feel myself somewhat weary. (p. 325/6)

Although Antony, in need of a rest, apologizes for the « sudden » end of his tale, the reader, at the conclusion of some three hundred pages, is hardly likely to find it precipitous. Still More does not quite release us. Vincent's response pushes into the future with the promise to repeat the tale, « I propose, uncle, as my poor wit and learning will serve me, to put your good counsel in remembrance, not in our own language only, but in the Almain tongue, too ». (p. 326) The reader will remember, from the title page, that the story was not only to be written in Hungarian and German, but to be made in Latin and translated into French and English. The fictional game here tantalizes us with the notion of endless taletelling. The importance of language, telling stories, playing with roles is thus suggested. On this earth, More seems to say, spiritual truth can best be apprehended through fiction.

More's life, like his art, witnesses to his belief in the power of the word. His last months in the Tower were, after all, spent writing. It seems as though he wrote and revised, created fictions, donned multiple masks, perfected his figures of metaphor, irony, and paradox, right up to the end. By means of his literary skill More as an author did all that he could to realize Antony's final prayer for the reader, that he may be « inwardly taught in his heart ». Like Sidney after him, More would have defended the power of poetry (fiction) to teach truth.

This paradox inspired Christ's parables and Plato's Dialogues and has informed our best literature for centuries. As Isaac Bashevis Singer testified in his 1978 Nobel Prize address :

> The storyteller of our time, as in any other time, must be an entertainer of the spirit in the full sense of the word, not just a preacher of social and political ideals. There is no paradise for bored readers and no excuse for tedious literature that does not intrigue the reader, uplift his spirit, give him the joy and the escape that true art always grants.

Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort* is true art in Singer's sense, a work that « entertains the spirit ».

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NOTES

1. In the 1522 treatise there is no dramatic framework, little humor, and the narrative voice resolutely refuses to admit the value of worldly pleasure. For example, More says, « We gross carnal people, having our taste infected by the sickness of sin and filthy custom of fleshly lust, find so great liking in the vile and stinking delectation of fleshly delight that we list not once prove what manner of sweetness good and virtuous folk feel and perceive in spiritual pleasure. And the cause is why ? Because we cannot perceive the tone, but if we forbear the tother. For like as the ground that is all forgrown with nettles, briars, and other evil weeds, can bring forth no corn till they be weeded out, so can our soul have no place for the good corn of spiritual pleasure as long as it is overgrown with the barren weeds of carnal delectation. » (*The English Works,* London 1557, p. 74).

2. See R.S. Sylvester's, Washington D.C. address, *Moreana,* 62 (1979), p. 101 and « The Three Dialogues », *Moreana,* 64 (1979). In the latter fascinating essay Sylvester sees a progression in More's artistic control from the « semi-dialogue » of the *Utopia,* through the dialogic interchanges of the polemical work, *A Dialogue concerning Heresies,* to the full flowering of the form in *A Dialogue of Comfort.*

3. See Louis Martz, « The Design of More's *Dialogue of Comfort* », *Moreana,* 15-16 (1967), 327-346. Before Martz's essay little attention was paid to the literary value of the *Dialogue of Comfort.* Although Leland Miles discusses its artistic merit in the Introduction to his edition (*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation,* ed. Leland Miles [Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1966]), he sees the work as unfinished, a « first draft. » He does direct attention to its literary purpose in a series of articles, including « The Literary Artistry of *A Dialogue of Comfort,* » *Studies in English Literature* 6. Recently Judith Jones discussed the organization of the work in an interesting article, « The Structure of More's *A Dialogue of Comfort* », *Selected Papers : Shakespeare and Renaissance Association of West Virginia,* III (Spring, 1978).

4. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation,* ed. Frank Manley (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1977), p. 3. All future references to the work will be to this edition and will be documented in the text.

5. Psalm 90 by the Vulgate reckoning is Psalm 91 in the Hebrew Psalter.

6. More probably drew the metaphor of waking and sleeping from Gerson. See the Commentary, *Complete Works,* Vol. 12, p. 392. Throughout *A Dialogue of Comfort* More's central metaphors are not only not original but *topoi* of classical and medieval literature. Yet he gives them a freshness and immediacy that involves the reader. In addition, his juxtaposition of opposing figures (such as the metaphors for God in the three books : Physician ; Mother Hen ; Jailor) startles the reader and leads to an understanding that truth is not one-dimensional. In considering the complex uses of figurative language or role-playing throughout the books, one begins to see that the *Dialogue* centers about the problem of discovering truth as much as the problem of suffering. As we observe characters deceived by false advice, worldly success, flattery, and spiritual pride, we come to realize that the « strengthened » or comforted Christian is one who is ever alert (wakeful, watchful) to this human liability to delusion. In this regard it is interesting to note that Psalm 90 was often used as a night prayer for watchfulness. See Joaquin Kuhn, « The Function of Psalm 90 in Thomas More's *A Dialogue of Comfort* », *Moreana,* 22 (1969), 61-67.

7. More often used this topos in the *Epigrams* and the *Four Last Things.*

8. More's delight in confusing fact and fantasy can be seen readily enough in the *Utopia.* There the fantastic journey to Nowhere is set in the context of a real embassy to Flanders. Tunstal, Giles, and More, and even Cardinal Morton constitute a realistic audience for the talk of Raphael Hythloday, babbler of nonsense. And More's enjoyment of the confusion thus created is evidenced in the 1517 letter to Giles, appended to the Paris edition, where he plays with the reader who didn't know whether *Utopia* was history or fiction. Apologizing for his lack of eloquence, he says that if he hadn't been bound as an historian to tell the truth, he would have used names for the island to suggest it was nowhere, for the capital to suggest it was invisible, for the river to suggest it was without water, etc. That of course, would have been much cleverer than what he actually did in using those barbarous and meaningless names : Utopia, Amaurotum, Anydrus, etc.

9. The fact that strengthening, rather than soothing, is the primary goal of More's comforting is reinforced by the Latin root of the verb : *confortare* or « to strengthen ».