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THREE DIALOGUES

The manuscript which Richard Sylvester sent to the editor of *Moreana* on 23 February 1977 carried these words: «*Germain: I loved writing this; I hope you'll enjoy hearing it.*» This printed version incorporates the few changes suggested by G.M. before the paper was read at the Thomas More Festival (Angers, April 1977), and a little editing was done by Lee C. Khanna and James P. Warren.

It would, perhaps, be somewhat of an exaggeration to say that one can effectively plot the course of Thomas More's literary career by orienting one's criticisms on his three major dialogues, the *Utopia* of 1515–16, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* of 1528–29, and the *Dialogue of Comfort* of 1534–35. To make such a claim (and I shall be trying to make it here today) involves an obvious neglect of More's other works: it plays down the brilliantly ironic historian who left us the *History of King Richard the Third*; it may distract us from the artful poet whose Latin epigrams were immensely popular in the sixteenth century and after; it ignores the adroit humanist who produced those masterly defenses of the new learning, the Letters to Dorp, To the University of Oxford,and To a Monk; and, finally, and perhaps the greatest omission, it neglects the committed spiritual writer of the *Four Last Things*, the *Treatise on the Passion*, the deeply moving Tower prayers, and, above all, the poignant pages, written in the shadow of death, of the *De Tristitia Christi*. Yet I think much is to be gained by such a simplified approach to More's *opera omnia*. To concentrate on these three great peaks in his literary achievement may enable us to filter out essential features of his artistry that might not emerge so clearly from a random up and down or back and forth survey of his entire output. I am willing in any event—for a time and among friends—to take the risk. Accept it, please, as a kind of experiment in criticism, an effort to see what the three dialogues can tell us about More's development as an artist.

I begin with an assumption that I trust most of you share, namely, that when More is writing at his best he tends to produce a most dramatic kind of prose, full of oral energy, vividly concrete, never shying away from a direct concern with all the shifting nuances of human character as they could be caught in the verbal medium. As I have argued on several other occasions, More is not at his best (though he is usually adequate) when he has to discuss ideas in the abstract. Argue he certainly can—as forcefully

as one would expect a great lawyer to do—but to my mind at least, he constantly strains at the bit when he has to conform to the patterns of rigidly logical demonstration or when one of his opponents drives him into an abstrusely scholastic line of reasoning in either philosophy or theology. The great humanist's letters tell us, once and for all, how More feels about late medieval scholasticism; he could be tolerant of it, as he seems to have been when he engaged in debates with students who visited him at Chelsea, but he was far too much of an Erasmian to believe that the manipulation of mental tokens was the highest form of intellectual activity open to thinking men. There are many places in More's works that could be pointed to as illustrations of this point, but I content myself here by citing only one of them, the little story Richard Pace tells about the two Scotists who disputed so subtly over the way in which King Arthur made a coat for himself out of the beards of giants whom he had killed in battle. After hearing their learned arguments—which included the key premise that «the skin of a dead man has a wonderful stretch to it»—More's comment, directly echoing his beloved Lucian, ran as follows: «I never knew that before either, but this is very well known: when one of you milks a billygoat, the other one stands by and catches it in a sieve.»

More was the kind of man, you see, who could never forget that beards were not skin, that billygoats had no udders, that a sieve was not a container in which milk could be preserved for very long. He lived, and he wrote and thought, in a very material world, a world cluttered with all the debris that God and man had created; he was—I don't deny it for a minute—a man of ideas, but ideas for him had to affect human action, human moral life, if they were to engage him fully in either his work or in his writing. Hence Erasmus' acute perception that More was a poet even in his prose. Ideas for him had to be dramatized if they were to achieve their full value, and the only way in which an idea can be effectively dramatized is to fictionalize it, to show it actually operating in characters who speak and play their part upon the stage of the world. More left us, alas, no plays in the strict sense (though we know he wrote them), but there is hardly an extant work of his which does not reveal, in one way or another, how deeply committed he was to dialogue, to conversation, to—a device that lawyers are often said to excel at—the literary art of putting words into men's mouths. More loves nothing better than the good anecdote, the witty variation on Aesop, the ironic innuendo, or the little dramatic interlude that can so tellingly enliven an otherwise arid discussion. And this, as we know so well, is never mere buffoonery, but rather a wise, practical kind of good sense that can both distinguish between heaven and earth and yet see their separate energies as inextricably

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involved with each other. For More, as he was to put it so movingly in the Tower letters, every case was both a legal case—etymologically a *casus*, a potential overthrow, be it moral fall or mere accident—and «a case in which a man could lose his head and have no harm.»

But enough for backgrounds and, for the moment at least, for those paradoxes that still excite us so powerfully as we contemplate the man in his works and days. The three dialogues upon which I wish to focus are themselves the best proof of the tendency in More's writing that I have been endeavoring to outline. Each of them, in its own way and in varying degrees of intensity, shows him trying to cope with the problem of how to embody ideas in action, of how, to put it another way, to dramatize his own thought through a variety of literary means. Taken together, the three works span the last twenty years of More's life: he was almost forty when he finished *Utopia*; the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* was penned just after he had reached fifty and just before he was elevated to the Lord Chancellorship; when he wrote *A Dialogue of Comfort* his public career was over and he waited, in the Tower, for the reward that his king and his country were preparing for him. More was not unknown in 1515; in England, he had already achieved some fame as a poet and on the continent his translations of Lucian and his links with Erasmus had established his name in humanist circles. Yet the first of the three dialogues (and perhaps the greatest of them) does mark the real beginning of More's public career both as a royal servant and as a writer. *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, on the other hand, stems from a More who is in full career, confident of his position in society, on the verge of his last and highest promotion—and yet poised, as ever, for a new beginning as far as his literary work is concerned. He has written polemically in Latin for a number of years (the *Responsio* and the *Letter to Bugenhagen*), but this dialogue is his first vernacular attack on Protestant heresy. Finally, the *Dialogue of Comfort*, his most developed English work, that work which, more than any other, can best be said to enshrine his deepest insights into both his society and himself, stands out as a kind of final testament for his family, for faith, and for what he could accomplish as a master of English prose.

We do not stretch the facts very much—at least not so much as those Scotists stretched a dead man's skin—if we remark that each of the dialogues is associated with one of those relatively rare periods of leisure that came to More now and then in the course of his career. How precious such moments were to him we know from his frequent remarks on the subject and from his deliberate efforts, not always successful, to block himself off from the rest of the world (those Fridays in the chapel at

Chelsea, or his earlier seclusion of himself in the Charterhouse just as his professional legal life was beginning to burgeon). The second book of *Utopia* resulted directly from the enforced leisure that was his in the late summer and early fall of 1515 as he waited for the powers that be to decide how they wished to use their willing servant. Book One, of course, came late, scratched up, as Erasmus was to say, *per occasionem*, amid the pell-mell scramble of London life when, as More put it in his prefatory letter to Peter Giles, he had almost no time at all left for literature, that is, for himself (*relinquo mihi, hoc est literis, nihil*). Perhaps this contrast between the circumstances in which the two books of *Utopia* were written contributed in no small way to the dynamic energy of the completed work: on the one hand, an almost serene vision emanating from the mouth of a fiery evangelist, an ideal society that can be firmly established only if radical surgery is performed on the contemporary world; on the other hand, a tense dissection of the European scene in which the desire of all the interlocutors for change and reform stands in stark contrast to the measures taken by the Utopians to ensure that their own commonwealth remain forever stable.

Utopia—and this is one of the great problems of the work—is in fact only a semi-dialogue. Almost all of Book Two is Hythlodaeus' monologue and even More's concluding comments, so often quoted, are given in indirect, not direct, discourse. In its two-book structure, More's Latin masterpiece dramatizes the conflict between man's ideal conceptions of reality and the business (or «busyness») of the real world which so often constricts his loftiest aspirations. And the «busyness» confronts us again in the opening sentences of the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*: «It is an old said saw that one business begetteth and bringeth forth another. Which proverb, as it happeth, I find very true by myself, which have been fain by occasion first of one business, after to take the second, and upon the second now to take the third.» Yet this dialogue may well seem to be one of the most leisurely paced of all More's works. He had, when he wrote it (between, roughly, April 1528 and the spring of 1529) a kind of licensed leisure, given to him by Bishop Tunstal, of just about a year's duration. True, he had to keep up his duties as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, but in the fall of 1528, because of plague in London, that court did not sit. In addition, More seems to have been exempted from daily attendance on the king for at least some of this period. Tunstal's letter of March 1528 specifically asks More to imitate Henry VIII's example in writing against heresy, so perhaps the royal taskmaster was somewhat less demanding than usual during the period when the *Dialogue* was being written. At least More was not sent on any mission abroad during these months—as he had been in 1527 and was again to be in the summer of 1529.

The relative leisure with which More composed the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is evident throughout the work (he even found time, in the second edition of 1531, to weave five new passages—two of them quite lengthy—into the already sprawling fabric of his four-book structure). The title-page of the *dialogue* proclaims it as a seemingly rag-bag collection of themes and topics: images and piligrimage (More will pun on the two words), relics, praying to saints, Tyndale's works in England and Luther's works in Germany, heresy incipient everywhere and threatening to overwhelm the «true, known Catholic church» as, in the grand climax of Book IV, its adherents had overwhelmed the eternal city of Rome itself. As he strives to organize these diverse materials, More adopts a number of literary strategies that enable him, it seems to me, to escape from the straitjacket type of quotation and response argumentation that so often corseted him in both his earlier and his later polemical works.

First of all, More does not try, anywhere in the *Dialogue*, to quote his Protestant opponents with verbatim accuracy. Instead, he aptly paraphrases Tyndale's or Luther's arguments, and he puts these arguments for the most part into the mouth of his young interlocutor, the character called «The Messenger», to whom I shall return later. Protestant opinion thus emerges in the *Dialogue* as a kind of slowly developing hearsay: men talk like this, «some say», and their words can have serious consequences. But ideas, when presented in such an ambiance, are amenable to quiet discussion. One can, as More often does, view them ironically, and they can be transformed, through lively dramatic scenes, into comic manifestations of humanity's proneness to error. The mode of the *Dialogue* is thus mellowly humanistic; the discussion, if need be, can extend beyond the bounds of the immediate topic, but it usually circles back to the central point. «Walking in a maze», the Messenger calls it at one place, but he admits, twenty-five pages later, that More does indeed «wind it well about».

Secondly, the four-book structure of the *Dialogue* may be assessed as an expanded, though by no means merely a doubled, version of the two-book format in which the earlier *Utopia* had been shaped. Precise numerical correspondences matter little here, but it is worth noting that Books I and II of the *Dialogue* form a unit which is only a little longer (about fifteen pages) than that comprised by Books III and IV. The first book of *Utopia* was a morning book, with the second book being set in the afternoon. The same pattern is developed and reinforced in the *Dialogue* where Books I and III occur on the morning of two separate days and

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Books II and IV take place after dinner «in the garden . . . sitting in an arbor.» The big break in the *Dialogue* comes between Books II and III where a time-lapse of two weeks allows the Messenger to go off on a visit to the University, there to hear new matters of Protestant «busyness» which, upon his return, he quickly rehashes for his fatherly advisor. Yet this paradigmatic four-book structure, despite its rather clean division into two halves, does not allow us to set up a series of dramatic polarities like that which invigorates the *Utopia* when its two books are played against each other. The effect of the four-book movement is not so much contrastive as slowly cumulative. Its leisurely pace looks ahead to *A Dialogue of Comfort*, just as its broad framework bids us glance back at the *Utopia*.

Utopia, of course, as many a commentator has noted, was an island very like England itself, complete with fifty-four counties, a foggy capital city, and a river in which the tide ebbed and flowed like that in the sometimes almost waterless Thames. But Utopia, alas, as More knew so well and noted so wryly at the end of his book, was not England—nor perhaps could it ever be. The *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, however, is completely, fully, emphatically, an English book. No other work of More's is so replete with details of English life, so fleshed with English history, so rich in English tales and stories, so hoveringly precise in the account it gives of English heretics like Thomas Hitton or Richard Hunne. Its speech is colloquial English, juicy and even bawdy at times, and particularly so when it indulges, as with the tale of St. Valery's, in that somewhat deplorable English habit of believing the French to be capable of almost anything in matters of sexual excess . . . It is in Book III of the *Dialogue* that More comes out strongly in favor of an English bible for the English people and throughout the work his pride in his own vernacular is pronounced and lovingly detailed.

With *A Dialogue of Comfort*, the scene changes once more. We are no longer in England, much less in Antwerp or in that ideal commonwealth «not very far distant from» the lands of those blessed people, the Macarians. The scene is Budapest, and it is Budapest at a critical moment in the national history of Hungary. The time is 1527–28, after the battle of Mohàcs in 1526 and the subsequent Turkish attack on Buda itself, but before the final fall, in 1529, of the city to the hordes of Suleiman the Magnificent. More has shifted his dialogic geography once again and this time, it seems to me, he has got it just right. *A Dialogue of Comfort* is in fact the only one of the three dialogues that works according to a double time-scheme; that is, the time in which its action occurs is not, as it was in *Utopia* and in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, identical with the time at

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which we know it to have been written. Writing in late 1534 and early 1535, More deliberately distances himself from the fictional time and place of the dialogue itself. Lord knows, during those lonely months in the Tower, he had leisure enough—an almost complete and perfect leisure for once—to look to all those things that meant most to him. And among these things was «myself, that is literature», [the man, that is the writer], for which now (to reverse his lament in the letter to Giles) there was ample time. The *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, the most finished, in the literary sense, of all More's works, proves that time was not wasted.

I shall return, a bit later, to the design and movement of the *Dialogue of Comfort*, but I should like first to review what might be called the «interlocutory situation» in the two earlier works. In both *Utopia* and the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* Thomas More is himself a character in the fiction which he creates. In the *Utopia*, he goes directly by his own name, though we would perhaps do well to remember that the «Morus» who talks with Hythlodaeus is not strictly to be identified with the real-life Thomas More, citizen and undersheriff of the city of London. The character «Thomas More» has a decidedly ambiguous status in *Utopia* and that very ambiguity no doubt served his creator well. His cautious, pragmatic voice contrasts beautifully with Hythlodaeus' assertive, at times almost strident tones. He is, as Father Surtz once suggested, a kind of «doubting Thomas»; or, as Harry Berger would have it, a temporary version (the young ambassador abroad) of the authorial personality who gives the words to all of his characters and not just to this one persona. The critics waver in their allegiances, some hearing More's own voice most strongly in Hythlodaeus, others insisting on a literal identification between the author and the persona who bears his name. As with so much else in *Utopia*, we are here on problematic ground. If the dialogue, as I said earlier, is really only a semi-dialogue, then the fiction too seems at best only a semi-fiction.

With the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More seems to have tried to solve this literary problem, but he did so in a rather radical way. One of the interlocutors in the dialogue («Quod I,» as the baffled Tyndale was to call him)is completely anonymous. He speaks in the first person throughout, but his name is never mentioned. Yet we identify him readily with the Thomas More of the title-page and there is not a single detail about him in the text that does not fit closely and exactly with everything that we know about the real Thomas More of 1528–29. Here, if anywhere in the three dialogues, More seems to be playing himself—open and honest, yet painstakingly stern. We learn much that is autobiographical, but the fiction itself suffers. When he named himself in *Utopia*, More complicated

and heightened the drama of his book. There he both was and was not the character who went by his name. In the *Dialogue*, however, he is nameless—and yet he is completely himself.

What saves the situation here, the factor that gives a real literary resonance to the central movement of the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, is the other character in the book, the heresy-haunted Messenger who brings so many new ideas with him on his visits to More's house at Chelsea. To a certain extent, the Messenger functions in the *Dialogue* as Hythlodaeus had in *Utopia*. Hythlodaeus' first name was Raphael and that appellation means primarily an angelic, a divinely appointed, messenger, who comes to earthly man (as he was to do later in *Paradise Lost*) with visions of a new world. More's Messenger in the *Dialogue* is scarcely angelic, nor is he so far-traveled as his older counterpart; but he certainly has a new gospel to present and (here we recall the etymological meaning of the surname «Hythlodaeus») he is, ironically, a great teller of trifling tales. The Messenger acts as a tutor in the house of More's friend; he is humanistically educated, but not broadly so; for him, grammar and rhetoric are sufficient guides to the understanding of scripture and he is Protestant enough, as the *Dialogue* opens, to believe that the good news given by scripture may well be sufficient unto salvation.

There is something very attractive about this youthful character as More presents him to us. Where, in *Utopia*, one had the sense that Hythlodaeus was older than young More, more experienced, more widely travelled, here, in the *Dialogue*, we find the situation reversed. The Messenger has little of Hythlodaeus' peremptory harshness; he is polite, not absolute in his convictions, and he can be, and is, won over to a different way of thinking as the *Dialogue* proceeds. Through him, More poses one generation against another dramatically; one reads the *Dialogue* as a discussion between father and son or even (another ironic reversal) as a conversation between tutor and pupil—an interpretation that emerges forcefully in Book IV when More actually gives the Messenger a series of texts, with «the places ready with rushes between the leaves, and notes marked in the margins,» so that he may learn his lesson properly before their last session ends.

Another way to view More's development of the dialogue form as he progressed from *Utopia* to the *Dialogue of Comfort* is to notice how, in each work, he concerns himself with the manner in which the dialogue itself comes to be written down. In both *Utopia* and the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More himself acts as amanuensis. But in the earlier work he is very hesitant about adopting such a role. The first letter to Peter Giles speaks of his inability to capture Hythlodaeus' «careless simplicity» (*neglectam simplicitatem*) and in the second letter (added in 1517), he worries almost ridiculously over the accuracy of his transcription. The irony here is most delicious, if we savor it properly: Thomas More, who was, as Budé saw so well, the real creator of *Utopia*, now withdraws from his book, which, perhaps, he had never fully entered. If unbelievers think that he has not reported Hythlodaeus' words truthfully, then «let them go to Hythlodaeus himself, for he is not yet dead.» The author is gone, but the book, and its leading character, still remain; to them we must return, as readers have done ever since, if we are to evaluate the final meaning of the tale which Hythlodaeus has told.

No such hesitancy on the author's part obtains in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. However laborious the task may be, More willingly accepts his role as transcriber of the conversations between himself and the Messenger. He cannot be sure, he informs us, that his young interlocutor will report everything faithfully to his friend; perhaps (like young More in the *Utopia*?) the Messenger may «mangle the matter» and get the emphases wrong. Once More's account was written, so runs the fiction, copies somehow sprang into existence and they were soon circulating among the apostates on the Continent. Such men might «change my words to the worse» and put in print a version of the *Dialogue* «framed after their own fantasies». To avoid such an enterprise, More announces that he is publishing his book himself and that he has had it examined and judged by various learned men before he sends it forth to the world. Let there be no doubt whatsoever, he seems to be saying, that this is «my dialogue»; if *Utopia* was a kind of semi-fiction (and thus created problems), then the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is no fiction at all—whatever William Tyndale or others may find to say later about the quality of its «painted poetry».

Not everyone will find this a perfect resolution of the problem involved. More's worries over his role as amanuensis, in both the *Utopia* and the *Dialogue*, reflect his larger concern with the way in which his books will be interpreted once they have issued from the printing press. In an effort to control interpretations he makes himself a character in each dialogue, in the one case (*Utopia*) offering by this means only a tentative guideline for his readers, but in the other (the 1529 *Dialogue*) taking all possible steps to ensure that everyone will read his book in the proper spirit. Neither strategy, it seems to me, is completely successful at the literary level. But there was a third way of proceeding and, in the Tower in 1534, More hit upon it. There he came to realize that no author can ever exert absolute control over a written work which he leaves to posterity, not even if, in the dialogue form, he makes himself one of the in-

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terlocutors. In the ultimate analysis, it is the character of the work itself, its inner integrity and harmony, and not any one character in it, that will provide the surest controls for the observant reader. All dialogues are, by their very nature, at least semi-dramatic. What More now discovered—and he must have relished the paradox—was that only an absolute commitment to the fictional form can make a dialogue fully dramatic. In other words, the way to make sure that one is completely in one's book is formally to remove oneself from it. *A Dialogue of Comfort* contains no young More, no «Quod I» or «Master Chancellor»; it is a case, a literary case, where a man must lose his head if he is to have no harm.

Thus the *Dialogue of Comfort* easily solves the problem of the amanuensis. Young Vincent, a reincarnation of the Messenger, announces at the outset that he is going to write down his conversations with the elderly Antony so that he and his household may keep the words with them; and at the very end of Book III he reaffirms his intention «to put your good counsel in remembrance, not in our own language (Hungarian) only, but in the Almain tongue too». Vincent, as we know from his earlier account of his trip to Saxony, prides himself on his knowledge of German; but, by the time he comes to set a title to his work, he seems to have encountered a few difficulties. *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, so the first page of the authoritative Corpus Christi College manuscript tells us, was «made by an Hungarian in Latin, and translated out of Latin into French, and out of French into English.» The book, More seems to say, must speak in all languages (four vernaculars, if German be counted, and the universal *lingua franca*) and to all men. In so polyglot a fiction it makes no matter that one Sir Thomas More (to use the literalizing editorial addition of the *English Works* of 1557) wrote it «while he was prisoner in the Tower of London in the year of our Lord, 1534».

It can, of course, be argued that the reason why More did not include himself as a character in his last dialogue stemmed directly from the fact that while in the Tower, he dared not put anything in writing that might compromise his position. But to grant this point is really to reemphasize the brilliance of the strategy which he adopted in the face of these very circumstances. He is not Antony, an old man (at least 77), nor is he Vincent, a young man of about twenty. If anything, as Mahmoud Manzalaoui has put it so well, «the one (Antony) is as old as it is imagined that he can be if he is to take part in such a discussion; the other (Vincent) as young as he can be if *he* is to take part.» More's own age when he wrote was fifty-seven, just about half-way between the ages of Vincent and Antony. The names he gives them also tell us something about his intentions. As Father Marc'hadour suggested years ago, Vincent's ancestor need not be sought in the church calendar, but will be found in the Book of Revelation. «Vincent» is a son of *vinco, vincere*, «he that overcometh»; and at the end of the *Dialogue*, More quotes the Apocalypse twice in Latin, with a startling bilingual pun, to reinforce his point: *Vincenti dabo edere de ligno vitae*, and *Vincenti dabo manna absconditum*. As for Antony, his name will conjure up various St. Anthonies (the desert father described by St. Athanasius, and St. Anthony of Padua), as well as More's friend, Antonio Bonvisi. These echoes do enrich the atmosphere of the *Dialogue*, but I am inclined to think that a more notorious Antony takes us closer to our author's central concern. Old Antony is also a *vincens*, a conqueror; like his great Roman predecessor, he has been a hardened soldier who overcame the forces of the Eastern World just as Hungary, and Western Europe, must now meet the Turkish threat.

Vincent, though young and physically strong, is morally weak. Full of fear at the outset of the *Dialogue*, he may almost be said to illustrate the «tribulation» of More's title. Antony, conversely, is old and his physical strength is waning rapidly, so much so that Vincent is never quite sure just how much longer his uncle will last. But Antony's moral strength is the real «comfort» of the *Dialogue of Comfort* and it is this kind of mental and spiritual fortitude in the face of the extreme threat (persecution and torture) that More is most concerned to dramatize. *Utopia* and the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* were both, to use Professor Hexter's phrase, essentially «dialogues of counsel»; but more than counsel, more even than consolation, is involved in this final confrontation. The *Dialogue of Comfort* is focussed squarely on the problem of how one gets from counsel to comfort, from mere ideas, or even mere conversation, to that ultimate strength of character that comes only when ideas are embodied in moral action. As Vincent puts it as the end of Book I (although he underestimates at this point the difficulty of the task that lies before him), «I shall with this good counsel that I have heard of you, do them some comfort, I trust in God.» And this process must develop not in the context of the business or «busyness» that had played so large a part in the atmosphere of *Utopia* and the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, but rather in the teeth of a much more terrible threat, negotium *perambulans in tenebris*, the business walking in the darknesses, as Antony calls it when he undertakes his analysis of Psalm 90.

I need not repeat here the many valuable insights offered by Professors Martz and Manley in their introduction to our new edition. We can appreciate fully, thanks to their fine effort, the beauty of the formal design of the *Dialogue*, its culminative three-book structure that both recapitulates the basic shape of *Utopia* and the *Dialogue Concerning*

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Heresies and at the same time evolves its own three-book movement through the matters of faith (Book I), hope (Book II) and on to the love of God, Christian charity, as Book III reaches its climax with More's poignant meditation on the meaning of the crucifixion of Christ. Or, to describe the structure in another way, we may recur to Antony's words 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.» Book I, the shortest of the three books, deals rather abstractly with what all men can read if they will—the teachings of the church and the comments of the learned upon them. Book II is an oral book, filled with what men say and hear, their tales and stories as they try to eke out their ways in the world. Finally, Book III is the book of thought and meditation, where everything that preceded it must be redefined in terms of the innermost spiritual and moral pondering.

We should now also be alert to the multiple audiences that More manages, within this carefully structured framework, to address: first, his family, who figure so strongly in many of the anecdotes; secondly, England, with its fiery, self-willed monarch—even Henry's heart might have turned had he read those stirring passages in Book III where the prince becomes a pauper and both king and beggar are shown to be equally vulnerable in the prison of the world; thirdly, all of Christendom, besieged by the Turk on its shrinking frontiers and by internal dissension (heresy and national rivalries) within its borders; finally, More himself, also besieged in both mind and body within both the fortress of the Tower and within his unbreachable citadel of the individual conscience. The *Dialogue of Comfort* is not an allegory, or, if it is so, it is one in a most attenuated sense of that term. We do better to read it as a multivalent, symbolic fiction, a drama of the mind and heart with which any Christian can identify and through which he too, like both Vincent and Antony, can learn to overcome.

Never was More more witty, more acutely playful in style and language than he is in this last great dialogue. As Antony tells Vincent early in Book II, looking ahead to the riot of merry and not so merry tales which will enliven that section of the *Dialogue*, «as you know very well, myself am of nature even half a giglot and more.» The pun, the language itself, tells us who wrote these lines, and never was More readier to give free rein to all the resources of his masterly wit and humor. The *Dialogue of Comfort* is a comedy in both the dramatic sense of the term and in that higher sense of *Commedia* which Dante would have understood. And it becomes, far more than did the *Utopia*, a transcending «praise of folly» (*encomium Moriae*) as its tripartite structure, like that of Erasmus'

masterpiece, rises to the ultimate madness of the cross itself. As More was to tell Margaret in that moving lower letter (the so-called letter from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington?) « *Non sum Oedipus, sed Morus*, which name of mine what it signifieth in Greek, I need not tell you.»

Only a detailed critical analysis of the text of the *Dialogue* could hope to suggest something of More's mastery of his verbal medium in this, the last of his vernacular works. Frank Manley has opened up one seam of this rich vein by showing how More's use of scriptural quotations often takes on a special resonance by directing the reader not merely to a specific verse but also to the total context out of which the biblical passage is taken. We can see this process at work on a small scale in some of the marginalia and markings which More made in his prayer book, probably at the very time when he was writing *A Dialogue of Comfort*. Nine of these notes read «*pro rege*» and they seem to indicate that particular psalms are especially appropriate as prayers for a pious and suppliant king. But the psalm against which the annotations stand often call down Jehovah's wrath upon wicked or unjust monarchs and we are left to wonder if we, with More, are to contemplate that vengeance even as we entrust all earthly kings to the care of the Lord.

Context is crucial here, as it is everywhere in the *Dialogue of Comfort*. The work, so strong is the allusiveness of its language, forces us to consider all possible contexts, be they political, international, familial or private. So too with More's anecdotes, especially Mother Maud's tale of scrupulous and unscrupulous consciences in Book II, the longest, the most fully orchestrated, of all More's many fables. The tale is a subtly revised version of a story that Chancellor Audely («Ad» rhymes with «Maud») had coarsely told to Alice Alington when she had gone to him for help. More's retelling of it in the *Dialogue* casts Audely's role in a new and unwholesome light; the tale stands as a kind of negative example of the true role-playing that constitutes the fictional essence of More's dominant theme. The *Dialogue of Comfort* has a part for everyone to play, be it Vincent stepping on the stage as a great lord who will not forsake proud eminence, or the part of St. Peter so eagerly opted for by the would-be martyr who both overestimates his own strength and underestimates the power of divine mercy. All this is not mere acting for its own sake, much as More loved such merry pastimes. Vincent acts, Antony acts, More's household (Dame Alice, Margaret Gigs, Henry Patenson) enters the *Dialogue* and acts, because these roles assigned to them by their loving father are indeed the parts they, as good Christians true to the old faith, will be called upon to play in the years to come. Although such a role does not have to be accepted—and many of More's descendants could not or

would not accept it —the offer of it is the last honor that a departing master can bestow upon those whom he now leaves behind.

The paradoxes, as they develop in the interchanges of the *Dialogue*, are almost overwhelming. Vincent, who should be bringing comfort to his dying uncle, becomes rather a messenger bearing tidings of tribulation. He is himself a tribulation to Antony, both because he disturbs the old man's rest and because, however weak he may be, he is Antony's only hope for the future of his family. And while Antony is indeed a comforter, he is at first a most reluctant one. Able to bear his personal tribulation, he is much less sure about his role as a perennial source of wisdom for his descendants. As the *Dialogue* unfolds, each man's role and character slowly change, or rather, we might say, the two figures gradually merge into one. Through their conversations, through the dialogue form itself, Vincent learns the hard Christian lesson that suffering (tribulation) is indeed comfort; and, for Antony, the lesson, apparently easier, is actually no less difficult—in this world at least real comfort is always fraught with tribulation; every man has some Vincent for whom he is accountable. Neither of these lessons is easy to learn. It is a trying thing to dialogue of comfort in tribulation. But that trial, a dress-rehearsal for the trial still to come, was one from which Thomas More did not shrink.

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