Exploring the Making of the Modern Mind Through Selected Texts

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By

Frederic Will

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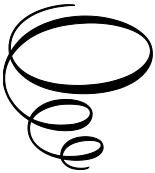

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY AS UNPEELING, OPENING, OR ADVANCING

Whether or not the events of history are pre shaped, built into the structure of being, or whether they are haphazard, and not under our control to shape or even to interpret, there is a sense in which the ongoing march of history is exclusive, closes off the past which preceded it, delineates what can never again be the object of discovery. (To discover something is to find that something just appearing over your horizon; it is to *un* as well as *dis* cover it.) The events of history, therefore, whether shaped or random, are unique and unrepeatable and deserve standing within us as interiorized monuments. Precisely that they are, and we can tick them off internally, becoming with each irreparably now like instant-event the more fixed-in-process. I take the liberty of calling this process, of removing the layers of the past, which leave increasingly exposed the pulsing fore-antennae of the present, a process of peeling, or perhaps unpeeling. Or perhaps opening. Those of us who peel fruit may understand this layered description of the understanding of becoming the forefront while revealing the prefrontal of some of God's gifts.

Human presents may be exclusivist and rarely slot into a neatly attendant continuum. That is, these presents, in which we know we are being-here, require evidentiary prompting, to discover their route to being first present then historical. We may, for example, come upon a text concerning the first recorded reference to living in the Middle Age; but we may ourselves not understand the words we are reading. We will be so far from living in the 'middle ages' that we cannot know the meaning of the statement we read. Parts of what the Middle Ages were can be unpeeled, unpackaged for us, but to know the true meaning of that 'time period' would involve having been at a site of unpeeling, across which what living is the Middle Ages is just being disclosed. That would be an evidentiary site.

Ancient history it is from which we have, or have been, peeled off, in order to release from it the present history noted for being—in many parts of the

world—the twenty third century after the birth of Christ. The following book will try out being an explanatory anthology of some of the peel off points taking place in the creative years that unfold between (what we now call) the end of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period—(loosely calculating the 15th to 17th centuries, Pico de la Mirandola to John Dryden)—for this transitional period during which the uniform dominance of the Church, the economies of agriculture, and the gradual coalescence of settled communities are giving way to more nearly industrialized societies, to the formation of organized states, and to increased individualism in art, music, and religious belief. Our table of contents will give many names to the date range over which we hope to extend our unpeeling optic. We will be hoping for a certain inner vision, as we traverse in mind this robust but incorrigibly open sector of created time.

The time launch, for the present anthology in cultural history, is 1496, and involves a brief study of two works. (Startlingly meaningful, this launch date, for its proximity to Mr. Columbus, the 'opening' of a New World, and the linking of ancient cultures to a new life. We will pay attention to one work of Marsilio Ficino, a great thought giant from the end of the fifteenth century. He will be etching old Europe, easily retraceable back into the mediaeval and even classical worlds. We will also look at a classic piece by Pico de la Mirandola, the Italian philosopher and theologian, and contemporary of Ficino. We will circle around this twenty-three-year old's work, his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. In that way we will pay tribute to the waning energies of that Neoplatonism which was to close the door on the reigning Aristotelianism of the Scholastics, which from the twelfth century on had so firmly marked the dominant thought-directions of neo-modern western man.

Around that time launch our effort from that point on will be to track the unpeeling of significantly powerful thought-unfolding from out of their matrices. (We are not looking at a time grid applicable to the whole twenty entry pattern of the present study guide, but rather at specific instances of un oeel that emerge in our progress.) This will be no matter of writing history from outside, either, as in a textbook purview, but rather of being the stages of consequential unfolding which we are part of. (*Being* history will throughout be our passage to knowing history. It will therefore be incumbent on the writer to be what events wish to have said of him, as Western Europe achieves its intelligibility through him. That will be the way the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of European construction and evolution will rewrite one another through the formulations of the author. This kind

of immodesty of knowing is, uncomfortably, the only path to the modesty of coming out as a simple spokesperson for the character of time.

The concurrence of the late fifteenth century philosophers, over the Neoplatonic conviction, that knowledge is in the end the gift of salvation, augurs well for the growth readiness of that Renaissance and Early Modern discovery lens, through which the growing-modern of Europe will eventually add such precious fresh directions to the human experience. Plato was himself a precisionist, targeting issues like love, language, social organization or law, as discrete fragments of the noosphere. The Neoplatonists, widening the parameters of intelligibility, sympathized with the idea that a community of ideas was a gathering point of intensifying meaning—as it neared its origins. For ancient Neoplatonists like Plotinus or Proclus it might be said that the cosmos was from the start and to the end intelligibility, and existed as a chain of interconnected meanings. The interlinking of the chains of being, within the order of the created world, was a gesture toward thought—aligned with what is, simply and globally.

It will be by establishing this expanding launchpad that we will make a place for unpeeling. And for what the textbooks tell us, far into our own time, about the bias and cutting edge of culture's meaning-pointers. We will pay particular attention to the transitions from one period to another. (For that reason, we have arranged our 'contents' chronologically—if within national parameters—maximizing the opportunity to observe the crunch of one period into another.) We will constantly build and dismantle these bridges as we scaffold out a descriptive structure for the way the Early Modern Period transcends itself.

ENGLAND

SIR THOMAS MORE (1478-1535)

Utopia 1516

As we continue tracking into the Renaissance, we come on figures who belong simultaneously to two worlds, the older and the newer. Thomas More is a harbinger of this complexity. He is best known for his *Utopia*, a vision world in which he tests out the alternative social forms imaginable in his time, and potentials for enrichment of the given. (In this he is as radical as his Florentine contemporaries, Ficino or Pico, working as a kind of poet-sociologist on the margins of change, but doing so without deranging the present as a standpoint for thought. He is also a friend of antiquity and its consistent, conservative values.)

Book One

The setting

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) describes an imagined culture. That culture is lengthily described to the author by a ship captain who has spent five years in this mysterious 'communist' land. More's work might be called an early novel, for it is in expository prose, awakens the imagination, and at the same time seizes the feeling of ordinary reality. The jagged edges of reality—the details of a distant way of life—remain vivid throughout the long central narration of the work, made by the ship captain Raphael to More himself, and inevitably forcing us to reflect on the realities of our own world. So compelling is the brew of historical reality—the reality of More's own life—with fiction, that we have to slap ourselves to realize that the outside narrator of *Utopia*, Sir Thomas More, was one day to be the Lord Chancellor of England. The world Raphael introduces us to is, as just implied, a loosely speaking 'communist' state.

Titles

Among the various titles proposed for More's text, a reasonable starting point would be *On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia*. The work concerns political philosophy in a wide sense. How should a government be constructed? What kind of society makes people

happy? What does 'utopia' mean? The classically oriented readers, of More's England, would quickly have grasped the ambiguity buried in the word 'utopia,' with its Greek roots implying 'no place,' or, by another spelling of the Greek, 'the good place.' Much wiggle room for satire is in fact available here, in this question about 'utopia,' and indeed there is ample dispute over Sir Thomas More's intentions, in portraying the present mystery island with so many lessons to pass on to contemporary England. (The foundation of Utopia dates from 1700 years prior to the present in which Raphael is narrating to More himself.) Does More want us to admire the described island, and its distinctive ways? Or is this work satirical in the sense of 'looking askance or with humor' on the new terrain described by Raphael?

The Lord Chancellor

From the beginning we are led through the tale by the distanced, calm voice of the narrator, one day (in fact) to be the Lord Chancellor of England, and one day (in fact) to be beheaded for alleged treason to that same state of England. At the center of the present work More is reflecting on a gripping tale he has heard on one of his high-level missions to the capitals of Europe. He recalls falling into a deep conversation with a wizened sea captain, who tells him about a culture far south of the Equator, where he lived for five years, absorbing the profound differences between his culture of the free-living mariner and the gentle culture of the communist island of Utopia. We learn, in the course of the First Book—there are two—some of the salient differences between the two cultures, More's own and the communist.

Theft

One of the sharpest points of conflict, between the two cultures, occurs around the issue of theft, on which the future Lord Chamberlain, as might be expected, comes down hard, doing his best—as a law-and-order figure—to suppress the original evil of mankind, of whom—as Erasmus too had argued—one should always expect the worst. The stakes around theft were indeed high in England. Capital punishment was a possible fate for thievery in the Britain of the day, and leniency was rare—especially in cases where private property had been threatened. The sea captain—we quickly become aware that he is more or less a spokesperson for the Utopians—speaks up for a more pragmatic response to such crimes as theft. On the whole, he has learned to value punishments that are constructive, both for the criminal—who must wear clearly marked clothing, and an ID criminal badge, and who must reflect on his crimes—and for the state, which can profit from the hard

labor imposed on the criminal. The death penalty, as the captain claims, has no constructive role to play in the resolution of a crime like theft. The entire utopian perspective—pragmatic and melioristic—is implicit here.

Enclosures

The sea captain turns his scrutiny onto another contentious issue, pertaining to the British economy, in fact to the economic development of modern Britain, as he sees it. I mean the question of the enclosures of land, within village and towns, which are set aside for sheep grazing. This move leads toward the privatization of public property, and away from the older traditions of public grazing land. In this matter, as throughout the present text, the direction of utopia is toward communism, communal property, communal thinking, the common good. The sea captain condemns the woes of private property.

The dominant perspective of the book

The above is the bias of Raphael himself, and he retails it vigorously to his dignified British collocutor. (Whether in the end More's own satire strikes out against communism or not is a complex question, to which there are arguably conflicting responses.) The overall bias, of the present seventy-five-page text, arouses much scholarly dispute, and not least because the whole text raises central questions about the perspective of the author. More seems to speak both through the distinguished and modest spokesperson of the British government, and through Raphael, the ship's captain and proponent of the world of utopia.)

Satire?

Are we then reading a satire, in the depiction of utopia, an overdrawn portrait of an unrealistically bland state, or are we reading the outline of a genuine eutopia—not a *no place* but a conceivable *good (eu) place,* with main paths of value for 'modern' societies like More's? Is the book a satire?

Adventure

An element in our answer will be that Raphael is satisfying that hunger, in More and his time, for adventure stories about the new world. (Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals' will exemplify the hunger for fresh discovery a century after More, when the extent of the New World, in the Americas, has begun to disclose Its thrilling and easily victimized new-old treasures. Charles Mann's book *1491* will convey the sense of global excitement, awakened

by the succession of fifteenth and sixteenth century discoveries, which are in and on Thomas More's historical horizon.)

Book Two

The setting

After lunch, Raphael settles down to provide More with the thoroughgoing account he had promised the dignitary, earlier in the day. Whereas the first encounter between More and Raphael had been recounted as an actual encounter, each man real in his setting, and the setting real, the second book recounts Raphael's account of Utopia, and locates itself inside no 'historical frame'—except for passing and casual references to the date of Utopos' founding of his city nation, 1700 years before. (True enough, Raphael devotes his introductory to a description of the island of Utopia, which is about the size and shape of England; two hundred miles across and crescent shaped) Raphael barely appears as a figure in Book Two, and when he does it is hardly to establish any deconstructive relation between Books One and Two, but rather to lend, to Book Two, an unmistakable air of fictionality.

Communism

In the second book, Raphael will continue to satisfy More's curiosity about Utopia, and will leave no doubt that he, whatever the case may be for More, is deeply beguiled by the principles of utopian communism. These principles include the abolition of private property—which, along with private wealth, Raphael considers the chief encouragement to human vice—the sharing of all goods and services, and a life in which the solidarity of individuals is their guarantee of a happy life. These principles dominated the society of Utopia, were the dominating insights of the culture's founder, Utopos, and provide a complete blueprint for the organizing of men in society. It goes without saying, perhaps, that the narrator of this entire story furnishes a sotto voce back theme of critique, to all that Raphael praises, a counterpoint element which deplores the 'monotony' of Utopia, and guarantees a scratchy tension to the whole tale.

Open doors

Salient details mark the form of communism Raphael recounts. The citizens of Utopia live in houses with front and back doors—potentially gates to a closing in of the family unit (often fifteen to twenty members) and yet in practice, because these doors are never locked, there is no closure at all in

Utopian cities. There are thirteen cities in Utopia, and as all resemble each other, and all houses are built on the same model, we can see that the lives of all the citizens flow into those of their neighbors, throughout the nation.

No jewelry

Aligned with this deflation of individualism, the Utopians, for example, do all they can to extirpate the social desire for jewelry, gold ornaments, and elegant clothing—to which they prefer a common and plain dress. They express their contempt for gold finery and its monetary worth by employing this precious metal in vulgar and degrading roles, as for instance in chamber pots, where the substance is regularly defiled; they express their contempt for foreign ambassadors who arrive on their shores bejeweled, elegant, and ready for the obeisance they do not receive.

Despite the plain style favored in Utopia, the attitude reigning there is not anti-cultural; in fact, the citizens find their greatest pleasures in reading, conversing, and sharing ideas. In other words, jewels and gold are scorned—anti-communist appendages—but the fruits of mutual understanding and thought are abundantly appreciated. Every day, just at daybreak, public lectures are given throughout the nation, food for thought that day, and for learning paths into the future.

It seems obvious, in its turn, that the tenor of Utopian communism will be happy. Pleasure is hardly sought for its own sake, but rather comes as a byproduct of virtue. Entertainment comes down to the communal labor—never too vigorous, as the well-organized system of society requires—in which one has the pleasure of doing good for others. No factitious amusement—gambling or hunting—is of interest to these island people.

Social Organization:

The Farm World

Utopia is the product of planning, and clearly depends on the reliability of human nature to keep it running smoothly. The basic is this: there are thirty-four cities on the island. The controlling system, sited in a capital city, is maximally simple: once a year three old, experienced, and travelled men travel to the capital to discuss the needs of government and public policy. These elders represent the citizens, both rural and urban. The dominant character of the entire nation is agricultural, and much of the concern of the three elders and the Governor General is the condition of agriculture on the island. Around each island city there are twelve miles of farmland, on which

the farm worker citizens of the nation work—as tenants rather than landlords—for a period of two or three years. The condition of these farms must be overseen, for the common good, which profits from good harvests and nutritious yields. Nor is the social organization of rural life so simple. No rural house has fewer than forty occupants, headed, in each case, by a mature master and mistress. One *phylarch*—note the regular presence of Greek in the Utopian language—rules over every three houses, with households and householders exchanging occupants every three years.

Urban and Domestic life

Whether on the farm or in the cities, the Utopians are gregarious. It is, for instance, very rare for citizens to eat alone, or to remain for any length of time alone. (It is the responsibility of the state to care for its citizens, seeing to it that the population continues its rotational patterns on a regular basis.) Life in the capital city, Amaurot, is exemplary for the whole nation. There are impressive walls, towers, and bastions, and twenty wide streets, each open onto a central thoroughfare. Once a year a new Prince is elected, meeting every day with his advisors. (Noteworthily, the three agricultural inspectors, mentioned above, are different from the three advisors in question, at the present.) Nevertheless, one can immediately see that bureaucracy is cut to the bare bone.

Food and drink

Within the urban dwellings of the capital, the food taken is simple—much garden produce, wine and water, little meat—and the bulk of the food preparation, especially any preparation of meats, is carried out by slaves. Given the nutritious simplicity of the fare, the sharing mode of the economy, and the equitable mind of the ruling Prince—replaced after a year—it is no wonder that there is little poverty, and that the island's highly developed medical skills are on the whole competent to deal with any diseases that break out.

War and other interpersonal actions

War is welcomed only as a means of saving the state, but never as a way of reaching out to grab land. (The Utopians have arranged their land as their needs and their desires require. They have few hidden appetites. A massacre, for instance, is unthinkable, for it requires a longing to kill, which does not exist among the Utopians, people of reliably temperate emotions.) In general, the attitude within an ongoing war is as little belligerent as possible; the culminating sign of victory being simply to kill the enemy's

Prince. Wiles are permissible within war, their purpose being to bring peace; for example, in prospect of a war piles of money are set aside for use in bribing the enemy. Since the chief consideration in war is the attempt to avoid bloodshed, it is easy to understand why mercenaries and slaves are regularly assigned to the toughest jobs, and suffer the greatest casualties.

Religion

It is taken as given, that nature and the world it brings us are benign and governed by divine purpose. The broad assumption, of life in society, is that to be good to others is part of aligning yourself with the purpose of your creator. Commonly, however, it is accepted that there are two different paths to that alignment, the simpler and more natural path, of following God's will in your daily activities, being 'a good person,' and the path of extraordinary charity, which involves living every moment to help others. Lives of the latter category are regularly taken to lead to a happy after life, as well as to insights—as into divine miracles—which no normally good life can fully understand. While the institution of the Christian Church is known, and priests are commonly found—no more than thirteen in any city—the presence of Christ is more to be felt in the articulation of nature rather than in any human institution. The reward of a quiet life is sufficient for those who question the ultimate value of religious behavior.

A Footnote on Satire

Both Desiderius Erasmus, a friend and admirer of More, and Sir Thomas More, were viewed as satirists, in the two works—In Praise of Folly and in Utopia—for which they were most popular. (On his first travel to England, Erasmus stayed with More and remained close to the creative sensibility of this equally prolific thought leader of his age.) What joins these two small masterpieces as satires?

In a satire, one narrative perspective adopts, toward another perspective, an attitude of mildly benevolent acceptance. In *In Praise of Folly* Erasmus has to look down, benignly but not belligerently, on the mindset of those mortals who are the raw materials of his portraiture of the pullulating human condition. (Folly opts out of any belligerence of perspective, by depicting herself as a bemused observer. In fact, Folly devotes the first half of her *oratio* to the genuine pleasures of life, modest delights of the flesh, indulgence in which should lead no one to blush with shame.) More, the narrator of his framed tale, adopts an almost whimsical attitude toward the

surprising account offered him by Raphael. Are the Utopians to be admired or thought stiff and artificial?

In either instance, whether the 'satirical' attitude is tracked from More or Raphael, onto the subject of *Utopia,* the projected attitude is gentle enough to qualify as satire, and not, for example, as diatribe, like Swift's, or excoriation as we might excavate it today from the rhetoric of politics.

Both More and Folly look down on their created worlds with a mixture of fascination and scorn. The looking down, in *Utopia,* can be tracked from the direction of Raphael, whose attitude toward the Utopian life ranges from tolerant to fascinatedly

Our two early Modern texts, More's and Erasmus', have in common a point from which to mock. Folly and Raphael interweave mockery with patches of admiration. How does their mockery, for example, square off against that of Rabelais, who boldly and not subtly, mocks everything from contemporary fiction, through the machinations of church politics through contemporary medicine through heroic sea voyages in quest of the god of wine. Neither Raphael nor Folly throws punches at the object of their mockery, but Rabelais permits himself a boxing stance standoff, clobbers without leaving a compensatory compliment.

Study guide

What is Thomas More's attitude toward the world of his Utopia? Does he value the agrarian communism he (through Raphael) discovers there? What values are peculiar to this world, in the view of the future Lord Chancellor of England? Would those values be common purpose, appreciation of peace, or the public distribution of the news, every morning at daybreak? If you incline to accept these values as indicators of More's view of utopia, would you also incline to consider this work as a satire—of an unrealistically simplified version of gentle life? Can a satire be both a critique of and a salute to the main traits of another culture? Is Erasmus' satire*, In Praise of Folly,* both a devastating critique of man the fallen, and a salute—right at the onset—to the beauties of taking it easy, the wisdom of the maxim that one should never complain, never marry.

Does the creation of a utopia suggest a modernity-seeking mindset? Is More's very making of this imagined land a step in the construction of the 'modern mind?' (Does 'imagining a lateral possibility,' as More does, forecast a readiness to 'think outside the box in Renaissance fashion,' or to assess one's own time and place with the needed freedom from the shackles

of the present? Is this kind of experimental freedom kin to the freedom of the scientist of More's time, who begins to value experimental thought as a kind of search for future constituting algorithms? Can you enrich this question by looking ahead to other examples of utopias—in Francis Bacon, Samuel Butler, or George Orwell?

Erasmus and Sir Thomas More were close friends, and spent quality time together on the former's momentous trip to England. Imagine two sets of conversations—one between More and Erasmus, one between Ficino and Pico—and review the skills they would bring to effective state building. Which pair would show the more pertinent skills of administration and social organization?

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY (1554-1585)

A Defense of Poetry (1580)

A Defense of Poetry was created in blank and poetic prose by one of the greatest English poets of the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney. (His sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella,* was composed in the 1580's, and is considered surpassed, as pure poetry, only by Shakespeare's sonnets (1593-1609). *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia,* ca. 1590, was Sidney's most ambitious single work, an idealization of the shepherd's life as reimagined in high poetic transformation. This was a work able enough to attract Shakespeare's own attention, as in the construction of one of the sub plots of King Lear. One has to wonder what kind of oeuvre Sidney might have completed had he not been killed in a sword fight at the age of thirty-two). His *Defense of Poetry*, written around 1580, was thus a young man's work, and clamors for our astonishment at the width of knowledge, consistency of perspective, and faultless eloquence of the text.

Philip Sidney was born in Kent into a family aristocratic on all sides, lived his brief life in the ambience of the nobility—he was educated at Christ Church, Oxford—was elected to Parliament at the age of eighteen, served in his twenties at various sophisticated diplomatic circles on the mainland of Europe. In the mid l580's Sidney returned to England, wrote the major texts described above, and married. His ongoing hyperactive life was to see him engaged, during the years in question, in any number of diplomatic dramas, such as a secret visit to Prague, to the exiled Jesuit priest, Edmund Campion, or a visit to Oxford as host to Giordano Bruno. At the same time, he continued his engagement with affairs of state, and in particularly with affairs supporting the Protestant cause in the ceaseless Protestant-Catholic conflicts which were eating up Western Europe, and which reverberate so intensely to us, from just this moment, in the writing of Montaigne. Tragically, Sidney himself was by this time close to his own death which would strike him down by a blow of the sword, fighting in the Netherlands, dying heroically (and with class) as he had lived in his own culture. Mustn't he remind us, as we sketch the portrait of this 'Renaissance' man, the figure whom, in many ways, Castiglione might have modelled, in creating his brilliant and virtually omnicompetent *Cortegiano*, his courtier.

The Apology for Poetry

Out of Sidney's privileged and highly educated background emerged texts which complemented, in elegance and erudition, his life as a diplomat courtier. The apology for poetry picks up on both a local quarrel—Elizabethan society contained its share of poetry scorners, mockers of an art which seemed locked in traditional styles and locutions, and deeply out of touch with the new realities of Elizabethan commerce, business, and internationalism. Sidney threw himself into this fray with a strong defense of poetry, picking up many of the themes of the Roman poet Horace, who in his *Ars Poetica* (19 BC), both exemplifies and argues for the supreme felicity of the poetic art, and anticipating a nineteenth century essay, Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* (1821) which extracts from poetry the recognition that it is the supreme human expression, and from the poet, that he is the 'unacknowledged legislator of the world.'

Greco-Roman Tales

For the contemporary reader, Sidney may seem to present a daunting barrage of classical literary history interwoven with anecdotes about the ancient Greek poets. Such references, among the literary cultured in Renaissance Europe, were on the whole an available new language, sets of meaning points available to bring up large literary contexts—like the tales of Odysseus or of Aeneas, or the intertwined strands of tragic action that joined Oedipus to Creon to Antigone to Eteocles. Sidney's apology for poetry is in part an apology for this inbred language of poetic discourse, and in part an aggressive plea for attention to the unique and enduring values of the Greek poetic genius.

Poetry and History

The notion of poetry, for Sidney, is of the highest expression of awareness and articulateness. By making ancient Greek and Roman his field of reference, he separates poetry from any effort to describe or account for his own daily, and raises poetry to a consistent effort to see deep meanings in texts and traditions.

Aristotle Poetics

To make this claim, Sidney must pick up the challenges addressed to this issue by Aristotle's *Poetics*, that critical theory reference point which hung

over all Renaissance efforts to formulate the place of the literary arts in culture. Poetry, Aristotle had argued, was more philosophical than history, because poetry deals with what might have been, the possible, while history deals with what actually happened. Poetry is an act within possibility, while history is an account of what happened. The validity of this distinction, and the account it gives of history, are both debatable, we would probably intervene here, yet for Sidney, and his time, elite opinion would have been largely behind Aristotle's position. Historiography was still on a shaky and anecdotal basis, whereas philosophy, to which Sidney preferred poetry, for its opening of being, was still back -held in the traces of medievalism, from which the universities had not yet released it. The true open spirit of poetry, for Sidney, was evident in the great musical poetry of the Hebrew singer, David, and the high-risk musical drama of Homer.

Poetry and virtue

The poet particularly deserves our praise, for in fact he not only surpasses the historian and the philosopher, in range and social usefulness, but he leads his fellow citizens in the teaching of virtue. The poet—*vates* (*prophet)* in Rome, *poietes (maker*) in Greece—does not affirm or proclaim opinions, but expresses the truth in exaltation. Thanks to that high flowering of mind, that approaches truth directly, the poet is not misled by the desire to please. Pleasure, in the vulgar sense, is in fact that distraction from virtue which poetry most carefully avoids. At which point, as suggested above, Sidney is carefully distancing himself from those, even in his own intellectual culture, who associate poetry with nursery room metrics, childish plays for the ears, just as he is avoiding direct conflict with another contingent of 'poet lovers,' those for whom poetry should be admired as pure provision of amusement. In these counterattacks against the vulgar in poetry, those who want street wise pleasures from the Lady, Sidney includes the vulgar, an increasingly taste-shaping element in Elizabethan society, for whom such gross pleasures as are met with on the stage seem a justification of art in general.

Platonism

Throughout Sidney's discourse run both an admiration for Platonism, and a fear of that perspective. On the one hand Sidney deeply inherits the broad idealism of Plato, his devotion to the beauty which 'never was, on land or sea,' and which was to become the durable on-lurer of western poetry, until in the Romantic movement, with such as Shelley and Keats, that beauty found itself coming aground on mysticism, despair, the kind of loose

exaltation the Romantics vanished into in Germany and England—in Novalis, Shelley, or d'Annunzio. A. N. Whitehead's thought that 'Western philosophy is simply a series of footnotes to Plato,' would appear equally applicable to 'Western poetry,' for wherever poetry exalted itself into high vision, from Homer to the present, voices were head proclaiming the poetry a byproduct of Platonic aspiration.

Sidney's Platonism

Sir Philip Sidney himself, refined and deepened the Platonic strain in English poetry, and did so from a keen sensitivity to the work of contemporaries like Edmund Spenser, or William Shakespeare. He was himself an ethereal but disciplined writer of sonnets. His attention was, as the form required, on dilemmas and resolutions, love called in to save the day. We should close with a sample from Sidney's work as a sonnet writer: the first poem in the 108 poem sequence*, Astrophil and Stella,* and a proving ground for what Platonism means in Sidney's work.

Astrophil and Stella 1: Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show

Sonnet 1

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain, —
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain, —
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."

From the outset, the poet's dilemma is how to express his love of his beloved. His 'sunburned brain requires moisture from others!', 'fresh and fruitful flowers.' Ultimately, he grows pregnant with the message he wants to convey to his love, his love for her. He does that by discovering that the message he wants to send is in him all the time. He needed only to free it from himself. The mind's true love could find its way into expression only

by being freed from its ideal condition, into a direct statement of itself to his beloved.

Study guide

Sidney was a sonnet writer, and had in common with his contemporary, the French poet Ronsard, that each was a clever and ingenious craftsman. (Even Ronsard's sassy epitaph for Rabelais, which we will review later, is immaculately formal.) What did Sidney gain by extending his sonnets to the number of 108? One could have posed a similar question to Shakespeare! Was the answer that one wanted to give the reader a choice among many ways of viewing choice and loss in love?

What did Sidney defend, in his illustrious *Defense of Poetry*? Was he particularly eager to defend the Platonic tradition—we will be looking into the Platonism of his contemporaries, Ficino and Pico—or was he shocked by what he considered the corroded English of his time, which lacked the sense of the classical tongues and the background of the classical experience? Also, to mention, Sidney took out considerable critical venom, in attacking the commerce and industry that was corroding the language of his time in England. He did not think that language should serve the interests of pleasure, but of meaning and beauty.

Aristotle, as we see, played a formative role in Sidney's view of poetry This meant that for Sidney, like Aristotle, beauty and virtue were partners. The good poem, like the good tragedy, should demand a morally congruent reaction. Does this seem to you an appropriate expectation to make of a poem? Can a poem exercise respect for virtue?

SIR FRANCIS BACON (1561-1626)

The New Atlantis (1626)

Science, Common Sense, and the Novel

The *New Atlantis* is a fictional novel published posthumously in 1626, and written by Sir Francis Bacon, whose essays have appeared at another point in this history. It will be recalled that the trademark of his thinking, was, like that of Montaigne, 'common sense,' a sensible man's reason addressed to everyday problems. Yet Montaigne's pursuit is different. He explores hidden corners of human behavior (and misbehavior) bordering on issues of what we would call psychology or sociology. In addition to the systematic application of common sense, which he shared with Montaigne, Bacon tends to fully exercise the new understandings of physical science, boldly advancing into empirical thought and, say, in the direction of the work of Descartes, laying out mathematical coordinates against which to track the complex expressions of nature, and of God its maker.

The New World

Like Montaigne (also Sir Thomas More, and Thomas Campanella) Bacon was fascinated with the new world of undiscovered places and people, and with the invigoration available from reviewing those reported or imaginable extensions of the human setting. It had been almost one hundred fifty years, at the time of publication of *The New Atlantis*, since the Americas had been opened to western travelers, and the complex and imaginative worlds of Aztec and Maya culture had seduced western explorers and gold rushers into horizons never imagined even in the boisterous Renaissance societies from which cultural missionaries were rapidly scattering out. To this commercial and expropriative drive, which was turning the Renaissance into the playing field of 'early modern man,' Bacon brought the imagination of a *new scientific society*, which his mind was able to extrapolate from the data of prior travelers and explorers.

Plato

Tracing from the ancient Platonic legend, of a lost continent of Atlantis, Bacon imagined out an ancient culture, far older by several thousand years than his own, to which a fictive voyage could bring yields of new understanding for the modern man of his own time. Bacon's utopian novel—for the brief, incomplete work in question takes its place in Western literary history too—was virtually contemporary with such soon to be runaway popular texts as Richardson's *Clarissa (1748)* and *Pamela (1740),* sharers in the early sentimental naivete of the romantic adventure. A tale gets spun, in these proto novels, in which the new world meets the archaic world, and is astonished to find itself anticipated and more, elaborated from the far side. That is, the archaic turned inside out into the contemporary, of Bacon's own age, takes first place in the story told here.

The New Atlantis tale itself

The tale that Bacon spins is hardly a 'tale,' rather an 'account,' for it consists largely in straight narration, during the course of which a band of inquisitive searchers recount their encounter with an archaic but ever so interestingly modern kingdom of ocean dwellers. The novel commences with the discovery of a mythical island, Bensalem, discovered by a shipwrecked crew west of Peru. The minimal plot advances through encounters with dominant Figures of Bensalem, then with the striking features of the island culture, with its state sponsored research projects, which revolved around the fertile margins of Salomon's House, the knowledge and planning headquarters of Bensalem. After arrangements have been made, for a generous period of time on the island, The Dean of the island's College continues to expound, to the western travelers, the degrees and kinds of knowledge that accumulate around the research facilities of Bensalem. The reader will hardly need reminding that the text of this narration barely transforms its material with imagination, and hews to 'the facts.' Hence, perhaps, the description of this work as an 'account.'

The Dean's Discourse

The Dean advances a voluble description of the origins of Christianity on Bensalem, and an account of the miracles that accompanied the advent of the New Religion, accompanied as it was by miraculous appearances, vertical columns of water over the surface of the ocean, other signs of the unique power of St. Bartholomew, Bensalem's patron saint. The perfect

chastity of the Bensalem community is the finest testimony to this powerful Christian stamp on the people of the community.

Breadth of Science

In the last third of *The New Atlantis* Bacon provides his ocean Dean with the perspective of that scientific organization by which, in the study of nature, the scientists of Salomon's house coordinate their classifications of the nature which God has so bountifully offered us. (We might seem to be looking at a Linnaean classification, passed under the lens of God's examination.) One gradually realizes, in the course of this direct lesson in research structure and policy, that the research aims of our own present social policy, are being creatively anticipated by Renaissance social analysts. As these principles of inquiry are effectively put into practice, among the directors of the Salomon's house project, we see that an overall view of the purposes and aims of scientific research is an omnipresent element of the Bensalem analysis of society. 'The end of our foundation 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.'

Merchants of Light

The tale reminds us of our own day, when a great culture is thirsty for knowledge of how to develop, with powerful and hard wrung skills, wrung from the experience of another great culture—I think of the tens of thousands of Chinese students in the United States, annually returning home, after graduation, with new 'data' and 'info systems' picked up out of the brain trusts of American State University classrooms. In a similar light, and presciently anticipant, Bacon sees to it that the professionals of Salomon's House go out on knowledge collecting missions to other civilized zones of their known archaic culture world. From there they return with the fruits of others' learnings, bought cheap. For the benefit of their guests hey carefully characterize the kinds of missionaries they send out from their island kingdom.

Depredators, Mystery Men, Pioneers, Compilers, Dowry Men

Three men go out on mission annually, from the House of Salomon, to gather records (anonymously) of experiments, which are found in all manner of imported books and texts. These men are called *depredators.*

Three men go out annually to gather the experiments that have taken place elsewhere in the liberal arts and the mechanical arts, respectively. These are called *mystery men.*

Certain men go out to try out new experiments that they think of value. These men are called *pioneers* because they free wheel on the margins of science, and invent freely—using the materials of the natural world.

Three men go out every year—they are calle*d compilers*—to collect previous data extractions, in order to render them ready to process, analyze, and graph the knowledge already deposited in the vaults of the island kingdom. Pre computer, essentially, the society of Bacon has gone far toward understanding the drives for computation in the formation of a modern society.

Dowry men are sent out in trios, annually, to canvas the potential benefits, for their society, of the medicinal discoveries made possible by earlier expeditions. They are guardians of the welfare of their own native land, and we can under-hear Bacon calling out for the attentions of his own essentially still mediaeval version of agricultural society.

Discovery Fiction, and the Organic

One will have observed that the major figures of this narration—the Dean of the House of Salomon, the circulating figures and explainers from within the system of the House of Salomon; or among the quite anonymous crew of sailors from the archaic Atlantic world who first establish rowboat level contact with westerners, that these archaic but admirable figures are pretty much cardboard copies of the ideas they express. The visitors are in a constant state of awed pause, curious for everything they hear, and of course properly respectful. The genre of the novel has here the foundation of its developmental history, as does the genre of testifying to the surprising breadth and surprising customs of people in hitherto unfamiliar lands.

Literary history

The New Atlantis is a harbinger of many soon to be created fictional hits like *Pamela* (1740) or *Clarissa* (1748), both by Samuel Richardson, which stress the social underpinnings of recognizable emotional lives, or, even earlier in the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or *Moll Flanders* (1722), both of which still display something of the artificial jointness we note in *The New Atlantis* and in its portrayal of organic

characters. The textual passage needed, to slip from the mindset of Bacon over into that of Defoe, is like any major cultural shift in sensibilities, not to be stormed, but to be released. One is reminded of an old discussion of Homer's capacity, or lack of same, to present his major characters as full bodied, rather than as assemblages of parts which need to be recreated or rejoined from inside them. Bacon is arguably starting from that same kind of literary historical challenge; how to make whole characters out of words.

Bacon the Moralist

For the most part, as we know, Bacon was not on the path to fictions. His world as a moralist dominated his common sense understanding of what works in life, and on that course, the path of the scholar of society, seeking for improved human adjustments to life as it is, Bacon carved out a unique place as a social visionary, which is where we find him in *The New Atlantis* as well as in his *Essays.* His model of a self-conscious polity, planning out its step-by-step development, is a great contribution to the growing science of social policy, which expressed the same point in the American sixties, as the author looked out on the greening of America?) It is a mere and miserable solitude to want true friends, without which the world is but a wilderness. The intimacy of true friends to one another, in a society, provides a kind of civil shrift, by which we can confess one another, and relieve one another of those pains imposed by daily existence; 'sharers of cares,' as the Romans put it.

From *The New Atlantis*

38. *Of Nature in Men*

Human nature, thinks Bacon, is hard to counteract, and requires great attention, lest it recur powerfully, and declare itself just when least appropriate. For Bacon, the key to dealing with our human nature—our particular and forceful propensities, like drinking, or gossiping, or ignoring our prayers—is to 'bend nature like a wand,' handling it subtly with no expectation of finally subduing it. Good sense, in dealing with one's nature, depends on the individual's willingness not to expect too much of himself, not to be easily discouraged, and above all to plan 'intermissions,' when he is able to indulge himself in that 'glass of wine' or 'tidbit of gossip' which placates nature without turning over the power to it.