

DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

BECAUSE EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE A CELL PHONE

AND SOME SOMA: THE SPECTRE OF UTOPIA

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The very word Utopia evokes images of an ideal world. It is a world without war, hunger, plague, or troubles of any kind. The kind of place where everything is as it should be. However that very word is “compounded from Greek *ou* and *topos*, meaning no place”<sup>1</sup>. It is obvious that Thomas More, the books author, intended for there to be some irony in the title. However as much as he knew such a place did not exist, there is a greater irony in modern man trying to create this Utopia. For though Utopia was once no place, it has become the most ideal place. It is now synonymous with heaven on earth, and societal perfection. Yet was this More’s intention? One cannot help but notice some strange ideas in his book that seem all the more agreeable if one lives in a postmodern society. Yet it is also obvious that there is absurdity in these pages, for More makes statements that are obviously not his best advice. Yet it is the content and meaning of his book that have remained somewhat elusive for about five hundred years. Was he just being satirical or is there a formula for success hidden in those pages? This paper will shed light on what influenced More to write Utopia, what he hoped to accomplish in its writing, and how his ideas have shaped Modern Society.

In order to know anything about an author’s work one must first know the author. “...Born in London, 7 February, 1477-78...He was the sole surviving son of Sir John More, barrister and later judge, by his first wife Agnes, daughter of Thomas Graunger.”<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas More was British by birth and by the grace of God. His formative years were spent in study and schooling first at St. Anthony’s School in Threadneedle street.<sup>3</sup> Due to the intervention of

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, Robert M. ed. “Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia” by Sir Thomas More in Utopia: A New Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism (New York: W.W. Norton & Company INC, 1975), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Huddleston, G. Roger, *Catholic Encyclopedia: St. Thomas More* transcribed by, Marie Jutras New York, New York.: New Advent, 2003. [Online] available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14689c.htm>; accessed 3 Dec. 3, 2003; Internet

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Cardinal Morton the Archbishop of Canterbury More was able to get in to Oxford in about 1492, at the tender age of 14.<sup>4</sup> While Columbus was discovering a new world, More was studying about the old one. More quickly became proficient in Latin, Greek, and French, and studied history, mathematics, and music.<sup>5</sup> In 1494 “More was recalled to London and entered as a law student at New Inn.”<sup>6</sup> More transferred to Lincoln Inn and further studied law as he grew in reputation within the English judicial system.<sup>7</sup> Yet More was also very influenced by the emerging Humanist Renaissance. “...He was especially devoted to the works of Pico de Mirandola, of whose life he published an English translation some years later.”<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Pico de Mirandola was an Italian author who, though he lived during More’s lifetime, died in 1494 never having met More. Mirandola wrote a remarkable work entitled *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the work outlines what Pico believes the dignity of man is based on. Pico sets forth the idea that man is a creature of great dignity for “Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly this must have had a strong influence on the young More as his studies gave him an idea as to what the true nature of humanity was. Though to say that Mirandola was More’s strongest influence would be a bit extreme, for More met Erasmus in 1497 and the two soon became good friends.<sup>10</sup> It seems quite clear the piety and humanism of Erasmus had a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John H. Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 223.

significant effect on More. Desiderius Erasmus is considered by many to be “the most brilliant and most important leader of German humanism.”<sup>11</sup> Erasmus was one of the most influential writers of the renaissance. A staunch Catholic as well as a proud humanist, Erasmus defended Catholicism against revolutionaries like Martin Luther. Erasmus further solidified in More the idea of free will that Mirandola had first opened him up to. Furthermore Erasmus had a great love of learning and it is certain that his scholasticism was not lost on the already bookish More. Yet beyond these intellectual influences, More was also deeply influence by Catholicism. He even thought of joining a Monastic order but according to Erasmus “The one thing that prevented him from giving himself to that kind of life was that he could not shake off the desire of the married state.”<sup>12</sup> More was eventually married and had three children with his first wife Jane, though she died in 1511.<sup>13</sup> More had been elected to Parliament by now, and his fame as a lawyer was spreading throughout all of England. In 1515 More was already under Sheriff of London but he was chosen by “Cardinal Wolsey as one of an embassy to Flanders to protect the interests of English Merchants.”<sup>14</sup> It was in this year that he wrote *Utopia*, and one year later he would have it published. Though he was influenced greatly by humanist thinkers such as Mirandola and Erasmus the political climate of England had an influence as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Huddleston, G. Roger, *Catholic Encyclopedia: St. Thomas More* transcribed by, Marie Jutras New York, New York.: New Advent, 2003. [Online] available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14689c.htm>; accessed 3 Dec. 3, 2003; Internet

<sup>11</sup> Sauer, Joseph, *Catholic Encyclopedia: Desiderius Erasmus* transcribed by, WGKofron New York, New York.: New Advent, 2003. [Online] available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05510b.htm>; accessed 3 Dec. 3, 2003; Internet

<sup>12</sup> Huddleston, G. Roger, *Catholic Encyclopedia: St. Thomas More* transcribed by, Marie Jutras New York, New York.: New Advent, 2003. [Online] available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14689c.htm>; accessed 3 Dec. 3, 2003; Internet

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Though More had not got on well with Henry the VII, it was Henry the VIII who would become More's chief antagonist. "The single minded Henry dreamed of standing at the head of an empire. The new king spent vast sums fighting against France for more than a decade beginning in 1512."<sup>15</sup> Indeed More was actually sent on a mission of peace with Spain in 1515 when he wrote *Utopia*. England needed safe trading with the city of Flanders, and it needed to remain on good terms with Spain. However More was not antagonistic to his king and he speaks well of Henry in *Utopia*. "The most invincible King of England, Henry the Eighth of that name, a prince adorned with the royal virtues beyond any other ..."<sup>16</sup> Though of course one could be led to wonder if there is not some hidden sarcastic barb in the statement "royal virtues". If by royal virtues More means those extravagances and offices best befitting a king, then the war-mongering Henry does seem to be well endowed. Yet there is also an economic consideration at work in *Utopia*. The wealthy landowners in Britain invented and utilized a system called "enclosure" to expand their holdings.<sup>17</sup>

Enclosure included the buying up and hedging of wastelands, the enclosure of one's own land by fences, consolidating ariable strips of land and enclosing them, and dividing common lands and pasture areas. The enclosure of common lands, sold by villages to the highest bidders and entailing the end of the common rights of villagers-rich or poor to use the land, and the removal of tenants in order to consolidate estates, marked a push toward "agrarian individualism." Enclosure in this sense drew considerable resistance, for it left many of the rural poor fenced out of common land on which they had depended for firewood, gleaning, and pasturing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)198.

<sup>16</sup> Sir Thomas More, "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 4.

<sup>17</sup> John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).208

<sup>18</sup> John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)208-209.

It is this very system of enclosure that John Merriman says is the key influence for More to write *Utopia*. Already an opinion begins to emerge as to More's intentions in writing this little book. Indeed More does seem to hint at the inequalities amongst the peasants and nobles in his work, but perhaps Merriman has made a hasty generalization. Yet having already thrown in an idea it now behooves one to take a look at what More's intentions in writing this book truly are.

Though most scholars generally agree that *Utopia* is a complex work with several layers, most scholars also fall into a category as to which of those layers is the most important. What is essentially at stake is what More actually intended by writing *Utopia*. Though scholars will probably all agree that this text speaks to many people on many things, scholars tend to believe that More meant it to say predominantly one thing. It is that one thing that More intended that has been the issue of greatest debate amongst scholars to this day. Several weeks ago at a conference in Waco at Baylor University, a scholar presented his particular opinion as to what he believed More was actually saying. Though this paper will deal with that scholar in his turn, it now becomes necessary to wade through all the opinions and come up with a workable list. When broken down to a simple form there tend to be about three different schools of thought on this issue. The first school takes More's *Utopia* to be a Political Satire. The second school takes More to be advocating a particularly socialist form of government. The third school is like the second but they expand their horizons beyond mere socialist government to take More to be presenting his grand dream for humanity as a whole.

Thus the first question would seem to be, is the *Utopia* a work of political satire? More essentially divided the book into two sections and it is a dialogue between More himself, and the fictional Raphael Hythloday. Here again More has inserted a pun as Hythloday prescinds from

the Greek root *huthlos*, meaning nonsense, and *daien*, meaning to distribute.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps part of the justification of More's eccentric naming convention, in talking of nowhere, with the nonsense distributor, is that he meant his book to be a reflection of a society more than a prescription for a society. This would certainly bolster the position of those who claim that the book is political satire. Indeed John Merriman takes this position in pointing out that More was responding to the enclosure system. "Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), inspired by news of explorations of the Americas, described an imaginary island where all people live in peace and harmony and blamed England's economic inequities on enclosure."<sup>20</sup> There does seem to be some support for Merriman's conclusion in the text of *Utopia* itself. In the first part of *Utopia*, the aptly titled book one, Hythloday expounds upon just what causes this system of enclosure in England.

For in whatever parts of the land the sheep yield the softest and most expensive wool, there the nobility and the gentry, yes and even some abbots...are not content with the old rents which the land yielded to their predecessors. Living in idleness and luxury, without doing any good to society no longer pleases them; they have to do positive evil. For they leave no land free for the plow; they enclose every acre of pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping only the churches, and those for sheep barns. And as if enough of your land were not already wasted on woods and game preserves, these worthy men turn all human habitations and cultivated field back to wilderness.<sup>21</sup>

Hythloday goes on to say that this forces peasants out of their homes, and they are then forced to steal in order to survive. However the justice system rewards all theft with death and Hythloday especially thinks that this is a gross injustice. For these peasants would work but there is no one who will hire them and no land left for them to work.<sup>22</sup> This also results in the prices of grain and

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<sup>19</sup> Sir Thomas More, "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 6.

<sup>20</sup> John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)209.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Thomas More, "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

livestock rising exponentially beyond what is bearable for the poor, and this poverty naturally coexists with wealth and luxury for the rich.<sup>23</sup> Merriman is not alone in his estimation of *Utopia* scholars such as R.W. Chambers supports this position as well. "...*Utopia* is, in part, a protest against the New Economics: the enclosures of the great landowners, breaking down old law and custom, destroying the old common field agriculture."<sup>24</sup> Though Chambers will take it a step further in saying that *Utopia* is also a protest against the "New Statesmanship: against the idea of an autocratic prince to whom everything is allowed."<sup>25</sup> For Chambers the *Utopia* marks not the progressive ideas, but indeed a return to a more medieval way of life. The political and economical systems that the *Utopia* is satirizing are the new and better ways of doing it. Enclosure could be seen as a capitalist move towards private property and efficient labor, but More does not view those things in a positive light. To be sure there is strong support for *Utopia* as a satire, but there is a glaring flaw in such a position. Those scholars who argue this position are often quoting only book one of the *Utopia* in their defense. Certainly More places some very biting criticisms of the political practices of his day in the first book, but he does not mention England at all in the second book. Indeed the first book only comprises one third of the entire text, and it is often only studied or read by historians and political science scholars. It is in book two that More, by use of Hythloday's monologue, describes that very strange country Utopia. So while the first position has good support and makes a good case it ignores over two thirds of the book, and it cannot seem to explain this oversight.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> R.W. Chambers, "*Utopia* and the Problems of 1516," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 154.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



Indeed it is the second position that focuses so strongly on the second book of the *Utopia* as they ask, is the *Utopia* advancing a socialist model of government? It is a horrendous oversight to assume that More is not setting forth a communistic system of government in book two. Almost no scholar will disagree that the country of Utopia is aptly described by the linguistic signifier communism. The question is not is communism present in this text? The question is was it More's intentions to set forth the socialistic commune as the way in which governments should be? Socialist advocates who read More see him as an early pioneer of socialism. One of these advocates was a man by the name of Karl Kautsky. Kautsky was the secretary of Engels and the editor of Marx. An avowed communist he published a critique of *Utopia* in 1888.<sup>26</sup> It is Kautsky's position that More was a socialist ahead of his time. According to Kautsky, "Had he (More) not written *Utopia* his name would scarcely be better known to-day than that of the friend who shared his fate, Bishop Fisher of Rochester. His socialism made him immortal."<sup>27</sup> More's fate was that he was beheaded for opposing the divorce and remarriage of Henry the VIII. While More did this for religious reasons, Kautsky's point is of a more humanistic nature. Sir Thomas More is known as the man who wrote *Utopia*. In high school this is all that students are required to know about More in their Medieval History classes. More's fame stems from the fact that he wrote *Utopia*, and perhaps also ironically from the support that communists give the book. Kautsky was not the first socialist to pick up the *Utopia* and marvel at the genius with which the society was run. Indeed it is hard to deny the simple efficiency and peace with which More's fictional society operates. In the country of Utopia every citizen, man

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<sup>26</sup> Robert M. Adams, "A Note on the First Four Essays," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 139.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Kautsky, "The Roots of More's Socialism," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 140.

woman, and child works at agriculture, but they work only six hours a day. However since their society is run so efficiently this results in plenty of everything for everyone, such that when a man goes to market he simply takes what few things he needs for that day. There is never any lack since all citizens are constantly providing for each other.<sup>28</sup> The country of Utopia is the ideal socialistic state, where the ideals of communism run perfectly and smoothly with only the occasional bump. Indeed the very word Utopia was picked up by Karl Marx and used to describe the ideal society towards which mankind was progressing. Though of course to return to an earlier criticism, the socialists make the same error as the historians, they leave out a big portion of the book. Though socialists will skip the first book and glory in the joys of the second, many socialists correct this oversight by using the first book to justify the second. The argument is such that the first book is a critique and the second book is the solution. Though what More is critiquing is not necessarily capitalism, the socialists will often conflate it as such. Yet beyond that the socialists often miss a very important feature of More and his Utopia, namely its religious emphasis. More was a devout Catholic; he died for his faith and is considered a martyr by the Catholic church, and any Protestants with an ounce of sympathy. Modern tenants of socialism and communism are often strictly atheistic and see religion as a weakness of society. It was Marx himself who coined the phrase, “religion is the opiate of the masses”. Yet in More’s Utopia the citizens have a basic faith in God, and upon being introduced to Christianity take to it at once. “Hythlodæus and company introduced Christianity to Utopia where it was well-received and appeared likely to gain in popularity.”<sup>29</sup> Thus the mistake of the Socialist is often to overlook the Christianity that More has infused his work with. This was part of the position of the scholar

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<sup>28</sup> Sir Thomas More, “Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia,” in Utopia: Sir Thomas More, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 44.

at the Baylor conference, for he held that the Utopia necessarily taught Catholic Virtue as its primary goal.<sup>30</sup> So it would seem that this second position also fails, but it is this failure that opens the door for the idealists and the third argument.

Though it is not as scholarly as the other two positions the third position is the position of the poets, they ask the question is More presenting his grand dream for society? Now admittedly this position has some followers in the socialistic circles, but there is a key difference between the two. The Socialist sees the country of Utopia and must go about creating that society so that they might dwell therein. This causes the socialist to gain a certain faith, but not in Utopia, in the system that will give them Utopia. To those who hold that More is setting forth the grand dream, Utopia is a jolly ideal, but indeed it is more than that. It is truly its namesake and for this it is not criticized. The fault of the Historian and Socialist is to take the book too seriously. More was no more a harsh, satirizing critic, than he was a forward-thinking, pioneering socialist. The poet is allowed to read the Utopia and enjoy it for what it truly is, a “Jolly invention”.<sup>31</sup> This is not to downplay the impact of More’s work at all, for it is undeniable that this book has had a profound impact upon the western world. Though this impact is due more to those who have read it than to its Author. Indeed the purpose of asking the questions and stating the positions was to discover More’s Intentions in writing *Utopia* in the first place. It is C.S. Lewis who points out that for an accurate assessment of More’s intent one need go no further than his contemporaries and his friends. “Our Starting point is that Erasmus speaks of it as if it were primarily a comic book; Tyndale despises it as poetry; for Harpsfield it is a ‘jolly invention,’ ‘pleasantly; set forth. More

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<sup>29</sup> Sanford Kessler, “Religious Freedom in Thomas More’s Utopia,” *The Review of Politics* 64 no 2 (Spr 2002) 219.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Varvis *The Schooled Heart: Moral Formation in American Higher Education* (Waco: Baylor University 2003).

himself in later life classes it and the *Praise of Folly* together as books fitter to be burned than translated in an age prone to misconstruction...<sup>32</sup> Just what is this position actually saying about this timeless classic of political thought? Simply this, More's *Utopia* is a work of fiction and folly. "It becomes intelligible and delightful as soon as we take it for what it is—a holiday work; a spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy and (above all) of invention, which starts many hares and kills none."<sup>33</sup> One need only to read this fairy tale to be able to recognize it for what it is, an obvious work of frolicking fiction. Yet the fact remains that men have for centuries interpreted *Utopia* as a work that proscribes the perfect society. Though to qualify this statement it would seem that only with the rise of socialism and Modern society in the last two centuries has *Utopia* taken on a salvific significance. Yet why has this charming work of whimsy been so misconstrued? Is there perhaps a deeper meaning that has been missed all this time? Is Utopia to be found in some other way than what has been previously tried? "It is of course possible that More's sixteenth-century readers, and More himself were mistaken. But it is at least equally possible that the mistake lies with those modern readers who take the book *au grand serieux* ('with deadly seriousness'—R.M.A.)"<sup>34</sup> Indeed Lewis has struck upon something that gets at the heart of modern Dystopian fears and Utopian desires.

It is no longer sufficient to read a book about the perfect society and let that thought amuse oneself, it has become imperative to create it. "The twentieth century began with burgeoning utopian expectations, but two horrendous world wars, the holocaust, the advent of atomic warfare, and accelerating environmental degradation (to name only a few crises) have

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<sup>31</sup> C.S. Lewis, "A Jolly Invention," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 217.

<sup>32</sup> C.S. Lewis, "A Jolly Invention," in *Utopia: Sir Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 217.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

greatly darkened that prospect. What's more, these disasters have not been unexpected detours along the road to utopia, but the product of various utopian agendas and movements themselves."<sup>35</sup> If men had merely made the mistakes of the historians then More might have been indeed quite forgotten. However history shows that men have made the mistake of the socialists, who are not content to dream of an idea but must see it actualized in a working system. C.S. Lewis believed that modern men, "...live in a revolutionary age, an age in which modern weapons and the modern revolutionary technique have made it only too easy to produce in the real world states recognizably like those we invent on paper: writing Utopias is now a serious matter."<sup>36</sup> Indeed the only place where the mind might take to flights of fancy is in the writing of dystopias. The dystopia is that uniquely twentieth century novel that is about the perfect society, but is also a reflection of those horrific parts of the current society. Far from being light-hearted or playful, books like *1984*, and *A Brave New World* reflect that rather serious and terrifying fate of the hyper-advanced technological society. George Orwell dreamed of a world ruled by a communist dictatorship in the not to distant future of *1984*. Alduous Huxley dreamed of a *Brave New World* ruled by genetic manipulators where humans were grown in factories and conditioned from before birth to suit specified tasks. These dystopian visions are no less than the twentieth century Utopias that man is presented with. The failures of communism in the twentieth century have resulted in a lost faith in Utopia and an even greater desire to bring it to fruition. For contemporary society Utopia is synonymous with the perfect world or the perfect society. It is a grand dream that must be made to exist for everyone, because everyone should

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Gwyn, "Utopia: An Abiding Presence" *Tikkun* 15 no1 (Ja/F 2000) 42.

<sup>36</sup> C.S. Lewis, "A Jolly Invention," in Utopia: Sir Thomas More, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 217.

have a cell phone, and some soma. The push for newer and better technology is a push for Utopia, for to be equipped with world shattering technology is to now have the burden of making the perfect world. However as Huxley and Orwell pointed out, this very technology that makes Utopia possible also limits humanities choices so far that only Dystopia remains.

In Conclusion this paper has attempted to shed some light on what influenced More to write Utopia, what he hoped to accomplish in its writing, and how his ideas have shaped Modern Society. More did include some political satire in his book, and thus the historians are correct in their assumptions. More also included a map of an “ideal society” based on communal living, and so the socialist position is plausible. Yet it is quite possible that More had no greater intentions in writing *Utopia* than to pass the time in Flanders waiting to plead the British case to the Spanish. The best explanation seems to be the interpretation that Lewis takes. *Utopia* then emerges as a whimsical, poetical, grand dream, and indeed a dream that is quite content to stay that way. It is only in the folly of modern society that the men seem to have forgotten what Utopia means. In trying very hard to make Utopia appear somewhere, the technocratic man is frustrated when Utopia is nowhere to be found.