perhaps, the difference between ‘myth’, as a social scientist’s summation, and ‘myths’, as an aesthetic provocation. Lincoln clearly stands on the scientific side of the divide.

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The Reader’s Guide to *The Utopia Reader*


The gate into this collection of utopian texts ranging from *The Book of Genesis* to Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “The Day before the Revolution” (1975) is narrow. It admits only severely trimmed excerpts; it is also broad in that it admits a great variety of texts that answer the authors’ generous description of utopian literature. The rules of St. Benedict and St. Francis are important historical documents, but it might be ungenerous to describe them as “imaginative projections of a society substantially different from the one in which the author lives.” Unlike Rabelais’ Abbaye de Thélème, they are the rules that governed and still govern monastic communities. It is true that St. Bonaventura, a Franciscan, complained of the laxness with which his rules were followed in the early thirteenth century (in Dantè, *Paradiso* XII) and, in this sense, the charters for communities that will stand as a city upon a hill are utopian, for they are violated and short lived. This is true of the charters that figure in Chapter 6 (“The Nineteenth Century,” pp. 182–311) of the *Reader* under the heading: “Communal Societies as Utopias.” The Millennial Laws and Covenants of the Shakers and the Twenty-One Rules of the Amana Community might qualify as projecting a society different from the realities of their legislators. Rule XVIII of the Amana Community is perhaps the best example of a rule meant to be broken: “Fly from the society of women-kind, as a very highly dangerous magnet and magical fire” (p. 187). The editors also include an excerpt from *The Communist Manifesto*. The admission of Plutarch’s *Life of Lycurgus* in *The Utopia Reader* has good precedent, for Plutarch’s *Lycurgus* has long been admitted into the cannon of utopian literature.1 It is, indeed, a projection of what François Ollier called “le mirage Spartiate.”2 Plutarch took it to be history.

**Utopianism Defined**

The gate that admits the texts included in this severely reduced *Reader* is shaped by the definition of utopian literature I have evoked above. Claeys & Sargent speak of

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"utopianism" rather than "utopian literature." "Utopianism generally is the imagina-
tive projection, positive or negative, of a society that is substantially different from the
one in which the author lives" (p. 1). This definition is exceptionally generous and
invites utopian sprawl. The problem with all definitions of "utopia" to be found in
dictionaries and critical presentations is that no single lexicographer or critic agrees—
or can be expected to agree—with the answer to the question: What is a utopia? The
reason for this ambiguity can be traced back to the genius of Thomas More who
invented the genre when he published his *Utopia* in 1516. The name Utopia, as all
agree, means Noplace (from More's learned invention from the Greek negative οὐ and
the noun τόπος). William Morris recognized this when he entitled his response to
from Nowhere* (Boston: Roberts, 1890). (Selections from both are included in the Reader).

The authors argue with perfect justice that Thomas More's *Utopia* is the founda-
tional charter of the genre. In its orginal Latin of 1516 the title reads *De Optimo Reipub-
licae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia Libellus vere Aureus*. Noplace was also referred to by
More as Usquama, Neverneverland. Yet, in the epigram of the nephew of Raphael
Hythlodaeus, who discovered the island, Utopia is called Eutopia—A Good Place.
Anemolius' epigram has engendered the antonym—Dystopia—A Bad Place. (It is strik-
ing that dystopia is the description of the Twentieth Century utopias included in the
final chapter of this *Reader*.)

More is responsible for the confusion covering the island of Utopia like a cloud. It
is a daunting task for More's reader to determine if he as author was seriously com-
mitted to Hythlodaeus' Utopia as the best state of a commonwealth (as distinct from the
monarchy of Henry VIII which More served) or a bad place; or if the reader really
needs to make the choice. It could well be that More's real object was to turn his
reader's critical gaze on the state of England in 1516 and that the remote island of
Utopia was, as Erasmus said it was, a "portrait of the British state." More's reader's
gaze shifts in focus from the newly discovered island of Utopia in the southern hemi-
sphere to the island of England in the northern hemisphere.

A rival and more accurate definition of a literary utopia bears repeating in a
review of *The Utopia Reader*. It is that of Gibson & Patrick:

A utopia should describe in a variety of aspects and with some consistency
an imaginary state or society which is regarded as better, in some respects at
least, than the one in which the author lives. He does not ordinarily claim
that the fictitious society and its people are perfect in all respects and that he
is propounding a total ideal or model to strive toward or imitate: most uto-

3. This telling description of More's project comes from Erasmus' letter to Ulrich von Hutten
256ff. "Utopiam hoc consilio aedidit, ut indicaret quibus rebus fiat ut minus commode habeant
respublicae; sed Britannicam potissimum effinxit, quam habet penitus perspectam cognitamque"
("His *Utopia* was published with the aim of showing the causes of the bad condition of
states; but was chiefly a portrait of the British state, which he has thoroughly studied and
explored"). The English translation comes from Johann Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam, with
a selection from the letters of Erasmus*, trans. F. Hopman (letters trans. B. Flower) (London:
238.