

## Interpretation of Utopia as a Whole — Remarks

### Stephen W. Smith

On “*The Second Letter to Giles*”: *A Portrait of the Reader as a Sharp-Sighted Man*

In my talk yesterday, I explored Thomas More’s prefatory letter to Giles. This afternoon I’d like to direct attention to his second letter to Giles, published after the conclusion of Book 2 in the 1517 edition. These letters serve as revealing book ends to the strange work we’ve been discussing. First, we learn from the letter that More is “absolutely delighted” at the response of one reader in particular to the *Utopia*. (Recall, in the first letter, he praised John Clement’s reading.) Perhaps in the spirit of *Utopia*, we should call him the Reader Nameless, since More discusses only the *manner* of his reading and not his identity.

In any event, this second letter is the closest thing we have to a portrait of the ideal reader of the work, or at least so he appears at first in More’s riddling and ironic presentation.

First, the ideal reader is described as a “very sharp fellow” or a most acute (*acutissimi*) man, who raises the basic question: Is the *Utopia* fact or fiction, lies or truth? Moreover, the reader goes on to raise doubts about the good judgment of the author who wrote his book in such a way as to prompt confusion over this subject. More characterizes this response as a piece of “frank judgment” and then offers some sharp-sighted comments of his own: “I suspect he is learned, and I see he is a friend.” Perhaps the learned are not so wont to have their ears abused, or have gained through education and reading some defense against the all too hasty credulity of our human race. The second judgment, however, is more intriguing, “I see he is a friend.” Reading, then, is an exercise of judgment, and opportunity for friendship with the author. Love friendship rule in the humbling exchange between author and reader.

More next praises the reader’s critical approach; “having selected certain elements to criticize, and not very many of them, he says that he approves not rashly but deliberately, of all the rest.” After remarking that criticism of this sort is the highest praise, More suddenly undercuts our confidence in the acuity of the Reader with a strange comment: “For he shows clearly how well he thinks of men when he expressed disappointment in a passage that is not as precise as it should be—*whereas I*

*would think myself lucky if I had been able to set down just a few things out of many that were not altogether absurd.*”

This is an understated, ironic rebuke to a sharp reader who, having noticed contradictions among other things, nevertheless still “approved...deliberately of all the rest”—whereas More himself judges most of the work “altogether absurd.” We begin thus to doubt the acuity of that reader for the first time, and in the next paragraph More continues his critique of the apparently sharp-sighted reader.

Note that More next responds “frankly” to the reader by asking why “he should think himself so acute (or, as the Greeks say, so ‘sharp-sighted’)” just because he noticed some things amiss or “caught” More putting forth “some not sufficiently practical ideas.”

More’s emphasis here, that the reader “thinks himself so acute,” is fascinating. He turns the focus on the way the reader prides himself on his own incisive judgment, on the image he has of himself as a reader—certainly learned, seldom credulous, always sharp-sighted, and never lame of understanding. Perhaps the sharp-sighted reader hasn’t noticed his own limitations—his potential absurdity—as a reader and thinker.

More makes this point gently by his next question, “Aren’t there any absurdities elsewhere in the world?”, and by the remarkable comment that “Actually, if it weren’t for the great respect I retain for certain highly distinguished names, I could easily produce from each of them a number of notions which I can hardly doubt would be universally condemned as absurd.” If this holds true for “highly distinguished names” (perhaps himself, his fellow humanists, the great authors of the past?) what of the sharp fellow’s own thinking? The letter’s irony, then, is gently humbling, a good-spirited dig, one that attempts to bring the reader into contact with the truth of his own self-image, with the character of his judgment and imagination of himself—in this way, More brings about something like a moment of conscience for the reader, a comic confrontation with the pest of pride, and perhaps he himself has just worked through such a moment of conscience in the composition of *Utopia*. At the last, I suspect that he is learned, and I see that he is our friend, too.

Thank you.