

Meditating with the Young More: The *Pageant Verses*

Clemente Cox – Universidad de los Andes, Chile

This paper represents a first approach to what is probably Thomas More's earliest extant literary production: the *Pageant Verses*. The extended version of this essay includes a detailed reading of the entire work in order to achieve a holistic view of it. However, in this summarized version, I limit myself to describing some formal characteristics of this pictorial-literary ensemble; and explaining how the ninth pageant—"The Poet"—can be understood as a coherent conclusion for the meditative movement of the whole. It amounts to a brief overview of the complexity of this fascinating piece. This analysis contributes to one of the characteristic leitmotifs of More's life and work: his integrity. How should it be understood? What role did literature play in shaping More's spirit, personality, and character? Although this analysis is provisional, fragmentary, and ought to be complemented with a broader bibliographic and source review, the exercise of meditating with More upon these verses enriches our understanding of aspects of the genius and heart of this man who, in the words of his Spanish biographer Vázquez de Prada, was "a man of deep meditation and long action".¹ In fact, it seems to me that these youthful meditations left an indelible mark on him that guides his long action, until its last consequences.

The *Pageant Verses*

Before any analysis of particulars, it is necessary to consider the compositional principle behind the *Pageant Verses*.² It is not just a composition of a few lines, but a unitary series consisting of poems and tapestries devised by the young More. Neither one is

¹ Andrés Vázquez de Prada. *Sir Tomás Moro*. Rialp: Madrid, 1999. p.96.

² For all citations of the *Pageant Verses*, I give in parentheses the numbering of the lines in the edition in More, Thomas. *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, edited by Gerard B. Wegemer, and Stephen W. Smith, Yale University Press, 2020. From now on, EW.

understood without the other. These are 9 pageants—that is, pictorial illustrations—intended to hang on the wall of his father’s house, “and verses over every of those pageants, which verses expressed and declared what the images in those pageants represented” (4-7). That is, accompanying each image, as inherent to it, are the verses that help us understand what is represented in the image and vice versa: “and also in those pageants were painted the things that the verses over them did, in effect, declare” (7-8). Furthermore, this pictorial-literary program was intended for a certain context: Sir John More's house, that is, it was intended as a series offered to the sight and delight of those who inhabited or visited the house, and probably also for their moral edification.

Although the illustrations do not survive, we can reconstruct their appearance from the prose description that accompanied the publication of these poems in Rastell’s 1557 English edition. There, each image is briefly described, and then the verses are introduced in this manner: “And over this pageant was written as followeth”, or similar expressions. It is interesting to note that the corresponding stanzas always appear above the images. We can imagine that the tapestry, hanging on the wall, would be rather at eye level, in the direct horizon of observation of the viewer, and, above the image would be placed the matching stanza. Probably, the images would capture the attention of an attentive recipient, invited by them to stop, and, to better understand the things represented in the images, their attention would be directed to the verses. Therefore, the movement of the spectator would go from the image to the stanza.

How should we understand the visual impression of this ensemble on a possible viewer? We can say, in a general way, that it is a meditation on what, at various stages of life

or from different levels of observation, is conceived as central to life or reality as a whole.³ Whoever meditates with More travels through diverse horizons—increasingly comprehensive—of ways of understanding life and existence in general. These different horizons are exemplified by allegorical representations; the first four directly related to stages of life: Childhood, Manhood, Venus and Cupid, and Old Age; and the four that follow as entities corresponding to broader horizons, beyond the life of the individual man: Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity. Each contemplated moment—one per pageant—stands, very sure of itself, as the ultimate horizon; however, all—except the last, Lady Eternity—are destroyed, dominated by the next. After contemplating these eight images, the set concludes with the “comprehensive perspective”⁴ that the poet, the ninth and last figure, grants.

According to the verses and the description we have of the illustrations, the set is in no way cryptic about the identity of each character represented: the description of the images assumes that they are generally allegorical representations easy to identify. Generally, the figures themselves express who they are in their own stanza. In the illustrations, the successive domination of each character over the previous one is indicated in space: whoever triumphs stands over the vanquished. On the one hand, when the defeated figure is one of those that represent moments in human life, it appears as such as a body that lies at the feet of the conqueror; on the other hand, in the depiction of the more abstract allegorical representations, the conqueror stands on an image of the figure in question.⁵

³ A more detailed characterization of the type of meditation in this ensemble is a pending task for detailed investigation.

⁴ *EW*, p. 1.

⁵ This detail is noted by Duffy (1976), p. 27. Robert A. Duffy, “Thomas More’s ‘Nine Pageants’”. *Moreana* vol. XIII, n. 50 (Issue 2): 15-32.

The verses that accompany the first seven images are 7-line stanzas in rhyme royal meter.⁶ The eighth stanza—corresponding to Lady Eternity—maintains the English and the rhyme but changes the rhythmic structure and adds an eighth verse. The ninth stanza—the one of the Poet—differs even more from the previous ones: it consists of a Latin poem of 12 lines in an elegiac distich. In each stanza, except that of the Poet, the figure refers to himself or herself in the first-person singular and, in most cases, describes his or her qualities and refers with disdain to the previous character, over whom he or she triumphs.

As previously stated, the eighth stanza—which accompanies Lady Eternity—adds an eighth verse.⁷ This numerical difference has been lucidly commented on by Elizabeth McCutcheon (1981) in a short paper:⁸ “[w]e could... view these changes as evidence of the young More’s interest in fusing thought, structure, and form, effected in this case by a simple extension of sacred number symbolism.”⁹ The number seven represents the world of time; the number eight represents eternity. As McCutcheon points out, this is the eighth stanza of the ensemble, and More significantly alters its number to eight verses. Everything seems to indicate a nod from More to a final step in our meditation: beyond the temporal order, we have come to the consideration of the eternal order. Now, how ought we to approach the ninth pageant?

The Ninth Pageant: “The Poet”

This figure undoubtedly represents an even more drastic change: the verses that accompany the Poet are no longer in English in rhyme royal meter, but in Latin elegiac

⁶ Cf. *EW*, p. 1.

⁷ Although it is less relevant for our purpose, it should also be noted that the rhyme scheme changes, from *ababbcc* in the first seven stanzas to *ababaacc* in this stanza.

⁸ Elizabeth McCutcheon, “Number Symbolism in St. Thomas More’s ‘Pageant Verses’”. *Moreana* vol. XVIII, n. 70 (June 1981): 29-32.

⁹ McCutcheon (1981), 29.

distichs, in a 12-line stanza. The Poet's verses address neither the figures previously shown nor a viewer in the second person singular, but rather refer in a general way to what someone who saw these images could learn from them. It is especially useful to analyze this poem in three parts of four lines each.

The first four verses (118-121) refer to the way in which the whole must be observed for the exercise to take effect. The first verse clarifies which is the exercise that is carried out with the preceding images: *fictas... spectare figuras*, that is, "to behold these fashioned figures." The viewer can learn from the images if he considers that, through some wondrous art, they convey real human beings. He who thus recognizes true men (*veros ... homines*) in images, can nourish his soul with true things (*veris ... rebus*), just as painted images nourish the eyes. These first four verses of the poem shed light on the compositional principle of the complete set: nourishing the eyes with the painted images nourishes the soul with true things. This is achieved if human existence itself is recognized in the painted figures: it is the truth of life that is represented in the images. But what is this truth of human life?

The next four verses of the poem (122-125) reveal the theoretical conclusions of the contemplation. Whoever contemplates the whole of what has been said in the preceding verses will see how the goods of this world do not come as fast as they go, and *gaudia, laus, et honor, celeri pede omnia cedunt*: "everything departs at a quick pace." After these three verses that show the expiration of all earthly goods, comes the question in the eighth verse: *Qui manet excepto semper amore dei?* (125). In the meditative spirit of the Poet, the conclusion that emerges when noting the shelf-life of things is not the reign of eternity as an allegorical figure, but the eternal permanence of God's love. Without wishing to draw hasty conclusions, we can verify an interesting coincidence with the preceding images: up to verse 7 of this poem in Latin, the impermanence of things in the temporal order is expressed; verse

8 expresses the permanence of God's love with the word *semper*: does this not correspond to the numerical symbolism present in the stanzas, noticed by McCutcheon? Apparently, the eighth verse transcends the temporal order and manifests the horizon of eternity, which in this case is not dominated by Lady Eternity, but explicitly attributed to the love of God.

What is next in the last third of the poem? The last four verses (126-129) change the tone slightly: they address men directly with imperative plural verbs, encouraging them to act in a certain way. The practical conclusion is introduced in verse 9: *Ergo homines, levibus iamiam diffidite rebus*. The Poet does not hesitate to teach: the conclusion follows logically from the previous meditation and calls for action. The urgency of this action, indicated by the adverb *iamiam*, becomes relevant and is somehow animated by the observation of verse 8: God's love remains always; what does it cost to abandon these unimportant things when the reward is everlasting? And the conclusion follows: *Nulla recessuro spes adhibenda bono*: human hope should not be placed on corruptible goods. This *recessuro bono* contrasts with the *permansuro deo* of the last verse: the Poet invites us to put our pledges in God, who will always remain and who will give us eternal life. All these concluding imperatives of the Poet begin in the ninth verse of this stanza: does not that correspond with the position that this figure occupies among the pageants? Indeed, he is the ninth, and from the ninth verse his stanza expresses the final conclusions—as a call to action—that the observer—aided by the Poet's wise voice—can draw from this meditative exercise.

What, then, do we learn from this poem? In the first place, analyzing the Poet's poem in three parts, we have discovered a way to observe the whole ensemble clearly and correctly. Secondly, we may draw the appropriate conclusions—attributing, in this last moment, the triumph of eternity to the love of God. Lastly, we may orient the action from this point onwards towards the pursuit of that supreme good that always remains and that is truly

worthy as an all-encompassing horizon of human life and of all reality. The figure of the Poet and his words appear as a guide to the set of pageants: those who have not reaped the desired fruits after a first observation can refer to this poem to find the keys to renewed contemplation. However, one question remains: will the fact that this poem is in Latin make it difficult for the observers to arrive at port? Do these keys to the Poet's meditation represent a message reserved for the privileged few?

Building from here, we can think more deeply about the fact that the ninth figure, who teaches us all this, is the Poet. Who is this Poet as an allegorical figure? The sources are probably to be found in Petrarch and Chaucer.¹⁰ But, without getting into more details about the sources, the figure of the Poet himself sheds enough light on the power that the young More attributes to poetry. In his verses, the Poet does not speak explicitly of what we can conclude from the other verses that accompany the images, nor does he place himself as the author of those stanzas but refers to what we can learn from the contemplation of the figures: he attributes the value of the set to the pictures. This is completely consistent with the relationship that we can observe between the images and the stanzas that accompany them: in the *fictas figuras*, the verses are always placed in the mouth of an allegorical figure. The figure of the Poet, therefore, should not be understood as the author of the previous verses, but as an observer of the whole who knows how to contemplate what is presented. But it is interesting that this prototype of the good meditator is a Poet and not a Philosopher, a Theologian, a Painter, or any other character. What does More mean by this? Could it be that he understands himself above all as a Poet? Or could it not be that the Poet is the one who best manages the compositional principles of the arts—also of this peculiar composition of

¹⁰ Says Duffy (1976), p. 21: "The Poet is a *vates* figure very similar to Petrarch as poet *and* character in the *Trionfi*". In future research, Chaucer's *The House of Fame* should also be investigated.

image and verse—so that he can better guide the meditation on these images? Could it be that the whole ensemble responds mainly to compositional principles of poetic art? Is it not also an affirmation of the vital scope and the deeply didactic effect that poetry can have in the lives of men?

We may also think of the peculiar wisdom that the Poet represents. This figure is sitting on a chair. It is not the first illustration that we see in that position: Old Age and Lady Eternity were also presented in like manner. Perhaps the chair indicates a contemplative and calm attitude, of someone who examines life with a little more wisdom, or someone who has reached some security—the fruit of observation and experience—in his understanding of reality. However, Old Age who, as we know, was defeated, was lacking something: he did not understand that his “chargeable matters” (61) were not so serious: he was unable to integrate the vision of eternity, in view of which everything acquires a relative importance. Old Age still thinks he is wise in some sense: Death alludes to precisely that when she refers to him as “greatly magnified” (71) and says that he must “set apart [his] pride” (72) and lend “[t]o me, a fool, some of your wise brain” (74). But what kind of wisdom is that? One that does not yet recognize the limits of its own knowledge, that is, that still does not recognize its ignorance, its nothingness, and the true horizon that gives meaning to things.

Lady Eternity’s chair, similar to a throne, indicates the power of the one who rules over all the above. However, with all her importance, the poet follows after her, who also sits in a chair. Somehow, More shows that the all-powerful vision of eternity is not the final conclusion: the task remains for man to make sense of all this. But is there sense? The last four allegorical representations before the Poet—from Death to Lady Eternity—go beyond the individual existence of man and place the dispute over which is the most powerful horizon on a terrain inaccessible to the simple creature, who, by meditating on these things, can easily

rush into despair. Or, rather does the absolute mastery of eternity give hope to the concrete and individual man who meditates on these things? Not really. But, after Lady Eternity the Poet remains: with a greater distance, he contemplates the scenes and reveals to man in what way they can be profitably used: once it has understood that the images represent real men, the soul can be nourished by true things and recognize that the love of God is the only thing that remains. Now, where do we get the knowledge of God's love? Perhaps it is at this point where we recognize More's very personal contribution to this meditation: the security in the permanence of God's love is something that the Poet does not extract from the meditation of the powers of this world but rather receives from another source. It is a collateral, though essential, conclusion provided by More, the Poet.