# The overarching utopian litotes: an examination of the relationships between the ...

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“ sometimes a word is put down with a sign of negation, when as much is signified as if we had spoken it affirmatively, if not more” John Smith (225)

Thomas More’s Utopia is a work that embodies and embraces ambiguity. In fact almost every aspect of the book is instilled with a range of interpretable and unclear meaning, from the intricacies of its language (such as the alternate meanings of its title, which suggests both “ good place” and “ no place”) to the presentation of seemingly paradoxical ideas with a range of middle ground in between. One of the most frequently used techniques employed by More in putting forth ambiguous statements and ideas is the inclusion of litotes, or double negatives. Perhaps the most conspicuous example is in the phrase “ no less beneficial than entertaining” (3) that is used to describe the book’s purpose in the opening statement. Many similar examples are scattered throughout the book, such as in the description of the thief whose sentence is “ no less” severe for theft than it is for murder (228), and in the Utopian idea that there is “ no less” provision for those who are now helpless but once worked than for those who are still working (228). In these cases More is twisting language in order to imply but not to implicitly state his ideas. This leaves the reader somewhat unsure as to how emphatic his statements are, and on the surface this gives the impression of More’s musings as being open-minded and fairly non-polarized. But on a deeper level it is a rhetorically compelling technique that tends to steer the reader into a one-sided interpretation in spite of the illusion of ambiguity. In the same way that a statement such as “ not uncommon” implies commonality, More’s litotes imply more than they openly admit. This kind of effect can be seen not only at the grammatical level, but also at larger and

arguably more significant dimensions of the book, even all the way up to its division into two parts. Parts One and Two of Utopia, with their conflicting arguments for practicality and idealism respectively are, in a sense, the two halves of a double negative. Because of this, Part One is both a prelude to Book Two in the sense that it introduces the conflicting identities of the two central characters, as well as the rhetorical way in which More is going to use humanist argumentative style, but it is also a postscript in that it is the second part of a litotes.

The discourse between Thomas More's persona and the character of Raphael Hythloday that comprises Book One is essentially a one-sided discussion of possible ways to reform England. This focus on reform tends naturally towards an emphasis on problems, rather than ideals, in the form of biting criticism of contemporary English society from the character of Hythloday. During his conversation with Hythloday, More's persona occasionally tries to tie a practical anchor to Hythloday's comments in an undercutting manner that is absent from the second book, where naive idealism runs rampant and unrestrained. In Book One, however, More argues that ideas are useless without action, and through his persona he prescribes the bringing about of practical reform through direct involvement of oneself in politics. Hythloday disagrees with More on the grounds that submission to authority is " absolutely repellent to [his] spirit" (7), but nevertheless he is used to explore the major problems of England from a fairly practical viewpoint.

These problems include uprooting of yeomen, excessive and ineffectual criminal punishment, uneven distribution of wealth, hypocritical religious

values and idle nobility. The insightful, provocative points that Hythloday makes on these subjects have an air of pure philosophy to them that is filled with persuasive logic to sway the reader. The effectiveness of such an argumentative style can be seen in such examples such as his comment in denigrating the judicial system that " when the punishment is the same, murder is safer, since one conceals both crimes by killing the witness" (15) and other remarks such as the following made concerning human nature, " it is impossible to make all institutions good unless you make all men good, and that I don't expect to see for a long time to come" (26). While these remain uncontested points in Utopia, Hythloday's most radical idea, the elimination of private property, is greeted with skepticism from More that is not seen again until a brief and somewhat diluted reappearance at the end of the book. This skepticism serves to provide a divisive viewpoint on the issue of private property (which is really the central theme of the text) and thus sets the stage for the second book, which is essentially Hythloday's counter-argument to More's questioning tone. Thus part one of Utopia is mostly comprised of practical analysis of England's problems, with a quick shift into speculation and idealism tagged onto its end.

Book Two can be interpreted as an idealistic guide on how we, (or rather 16th century England) might be able to build a close-to-perfect (or at least closer-to-perfect) society. The blueprint on how to do this is delivered through the shining example of Utopia, and in the process all of Hythloday's previous practicality is thrown to the wind as he delivers a fantasy-filled account of the strange island and its people down to the last minute detail. He begins by telling us of a landmass comparable in size and with similar

features to England, but as his account develops these similarities serve only to highlight fundamental societal differences that have arisen despite geographical and regional similarities between the island, England and Europe at large. In describing the Utopian way of life, More places heavy emphasis on the features that specifically serve to oppose the undesirable elements of English society critiqued in Part One. Currency is eliminated, and even looked down upon with gold being turned into chamber pots and chains for slaves, thus eliminating the imbalance of wealth (47). There is no place for idle nobility in the system of government, which resembles Plato's idea of a Republic as opposed to the feudal English system that Hythloday is so critical of. The justice system is lenient in comparison with the harsh sentences that More describes in his home nation. A work schedule of only a few hours a day with an emphasis on agriculture stands in stark contrast to the long, grueling hours of most English citizens. There is even a relatively high degree of religious tolerance, although it could be argued that this is only at a superficial level because all Utopians tend towards believing in a suspiciously Christian God anyway.

The brand of naive, impractical vision that More displays in creating this counter to English society is essentially that of a communist idealist. It is mostly fantasy that cannot realistically be implemented into any European society of the time, principally due to the European necessity for currency and trade. More admits this even before going into its details (through Hythloday) in the following passage from Book One:

“ However superior those institutions might be (and as a matter of fact they are), yet here they would seem inappropriate because private property is the rule here, and there all things are held in common. People who have made up their minds to rush headlong down the opposite road are never pleased with the man who calls them back and tells them” (26)

Today we can see that the flaws and impracticalities of Utopia extend past the difficulties of dissolving private property, but perhaps this is an insight that we have only gained from looking back on the failed historical attempts of actual communist governments. Certainly More’s governmental ideals are startlingly similar to those of later communist manifestos, with the relationship between people and government glorified in contentment, such that the government’s power is present but not perceived as coercive. Of course, truly non-coercive power may as well not be present at all, and More’s book requires a ground-up building not only of society, but also of human nature. The kind of tolerance and co-operation present in his ideals could only be achieved through reduction of conflict by unifying human thought and action, thus allowing people to naturally work together for the common good that Utopia represents. The question is whether More believes that this dilution of individuality is a worthy ideal, and to answer this we must return to the rhetoric behind the overarching litotes composed by the division between the two books.

Essentially, by the end of Book One the reader has been presented with an argument highlighting the imperfections of England, and by the end of Book Two Utopia has been thoroughly and intricately depicted as the opposite or

negation of this imperfect society. Thus, through the resulting litotes that Utopia is " not imperfect", More is on some level implying its perfection. In reality, Utopia may be better than England (at least on the levels at which More is critiquing society), but it is ambiguous as to how much better. An interesting aspect of the arrangement of the book is that, were More to have omitted Book One (as in the first draft of Utopia), the litotes would not be complete, and its resulting effect would disappear. The reader would be left only with the idealism without any " sign of negation", and More's Utopia would be far less persuasive. It is of course necessary for this negation to be placed at the beginning of the book, to avoid a necessity to contest the ideals of the first part. The ending, which provides no direct resolution as to whether Utopia is truly what it claims to be, shows that More is aware of this problem and is reluctant to counter his previously made points.

But while the book may seem to end in an ocean of ambiguous ideas, we as readers must remain aware that its argumentative thread at a deeper level flows strongly in the path of one particular direction of current. More's reasons for arguing so subtly and underhandedly for what seems an unfeasible idealism are somewhat ambiguous in themselves, as at first glance his idealism seems to violate the practical aspects of his humanist philosophy. Perhaps he realizes that to affect change an ideal must at first be present, even if it is an unrealistic one. Certainly, More's ideals could certainly not be implemented in 16th Century England in their pure form. It could be, however, that he saw the discovery of the New World as a possible chance to start a new Utopia, one that could be free of European materialistic constraints and untainted by the inertia of long established

social and political institutions. If this is true, then his Eden is an impossible one, but we will never be able to know whether he realized that this was the case. As it is, Utopia stands as an educative look at the basis of communist philosophy and its flaws, as well as a subtle and nuance-filled work that validates idealism through humanist rhetoric, thus arguing for what is ironically a far more impractical society than More could have ever realized during his lifetime.