



# Notes to Literature

Weekly  
reading  
booklet

#6 : Thomas  
More's  
*Utopia*  
(1516/1551)

# NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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More, Thomas. *Utopia*, translated by George M. Logan and edited by Robert Merrihew Adams. Rev. ed. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Yoran, Hanan. *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010.

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# Thomas More

**“Your sheep”, I said, “that commonly are so meek and eat so little; now, as I hear, they have become so greedy and fierce that they devour human beings themselves.**

## From *Utopia* (1551)

**I**t happened one day when I was dining with him there was present a layman, learned in the laws of your country, who for some reason took occasion to praise the rigid execution of justice then being practised on thieves. They were being executed everywhere, he said, with as many as twenty at a time being hanged on a single gallows. And then he declared he was amazed that so many thieves sprang up everywhere when so few of them escaped hanging. I ventured to speak freely before the Cardinal, and said, “There is no need to wonder: this way of punishing thieves goes beyond the call of justice, and is not in any case for the public good. The penalty is too harsh in itself, yet it isn’t an effective deterrent. Simple theft is not so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his head, yet no punishment however severe can restrain those from robbery who have no other way to make a living. In this matter not only you in England but a good part of the world seem to imitate bad schoolmasters, who would rather whip their pupils than teach them. Severe and terrible punishments are enacted for theft, when it would be much better to enable every man to earn his own living, instead of being driven to the awful necessity of stealing and then dying for it.”

‘“Oh, we’ve taken care of that”, said the fellow. “There are the trades and there is farming by which men may make a living, unless they choose deliberately to do evil.”

‘“No”, I said, “you won’t get out of it that way. We may overlook the cripples who come home from foreign and civil wars, as lately from the

Cornish battle and not long before that from your wars with France.<sup>1</sup> These men, who have lost limbs in the service of the common good or the king, are too shattered to follow their old trades and too old to learn new ones. But since wars occur only from time to time, let us, I say, overlook these men and consider what happens every day. There are a great many noblemen who live idly like drones off the labour of others, their tenants whom they bleed white by constantly raising their rents.<sup>2</sup> (This is the only instance of their tightfistedness, because they are prodigal in everything else, ready to spend their way to the poorhouse.) What's more, they drag around with them a great train of idle servants, who have never learned any trade by which they could make a living.<sup>3</sup> As soon as their master dies, or they themselves fall ill, they are promptly turned out of doors, for lords would rather support idlers than invalids, and the heir is often unable to maintain as big a household as his father had, at least at first. Those who are turned out soon set about starving, unless they set about stealing. What else can they do? Then when a wandering life has taken the edge off their health and the gloss off their clothes, when their faces look worn and their garments are tattered, men of rank will not care to engage them. And country folk dare not do so, for they don't have to be told that one who has been raised softly to idle pleasures, who has been used to swaggering about like a bully with sword and buckler, is likely to look down on the whole neighbourhood and despise everybody else as beneath him. Such a man can't be put to work with spade and mattock; he will not serve a poor man faithfully for scant wages and sparse diet."

"But we ought to encourage these men in particular", said the lawyer. "In case of war the strength and power of our army depend on them, because they have a bolder and nobler spirit than workmen and farmers have."

"You may as well say that thieves should be encouraged for the sake of wars", I answered, "since you will never lack for thieves as long as you have

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<sup>1</sup> Most likely a reference to the heavy casualties suffered in Henry VIII's French excursions of 1512-13.

<sup>2</sup> In the Republic, Socrates uses the same metaphor to describe the kind of monied individual who contributes nothing to society: "Though he may have appeared to belong to the ruling class, surely in fact he was neither ruling, nor serving society in any other way; he was merely a consumer of goods . . . Don't you think we can fairly call him a drone?" (viii.552b-c). In general, Plato's characterisation of oligarchy (whence the quoted passage) seems to have provided More with a framework for his observations on the condition of England.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these retainers were household servants; others constituted the remnants of the private armies that, in a feudal society, followed every lord. In the reign of Henry VII the latter kind of retaining was sharply curtailed.

men like these. Just as thieves are not bad soldiers, soldiers turn out to be enterprising robbers, so nearly are these two ways of life related.<sup>4</sup>

But this problem, though frequent here, is not yours alone; it is common to almost all nations. France suffers from an even more pestiferous plague. Even in peacetime, if you can call it peace, the whole country is crowded and overrun with foreign mercenaries, imported on the same principle that you've given for your noblemen keeping idle servants.<sup>5</sup> Wise fools<sup>6</sup> think that the public safety depends on having ready a strong army, preferably of veteran soldiers. They think inexperienced men are not reliable, and they sometimes hunt out pretexts for war, just so they may have trained soldiers; hence men's throats are cut for no reason - lest, as Sallust neatly puts it, 'hand and spirit grow dull through lack of practice.' But France has learned to her cost how pernicious it is to feed such beasts. The examples of the Romans, the Carthaginians, the Syrians and many other peoples show the same thing; for not only their governments but their fields and even their cities were ruined more than once by their own standing armies.<sup>7</sup> Besides, this preparedness is unnecessary: not even the French soldiers, practised in arms from their cradles, can boast of having often got the best of your raw recruits. I shall say no more on this point, lest I seem to flatter present company. At any rate, neither your town workmen nor your rough farm labourers - except for those whose physique isn't suited for strength or boldness, or whose spirit has been broken by the lack of means to support their families - seem to be much afraid of those flocks of idle retainers. So you need not fear that retainers, once strong and vigorous (for that's the only sort the gentry deign to corrupt), but now soft and flabby because of their idle, effeminate life, would be weakened if they were taught practical crafts to earn their living and trained to manly labour. However that may be, though, I certainly cannot think it's in the public interest to maintain for the emergency of war such a vast multitude of people who trouble and disturb the peace:

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<sup>4</sup> The close kinship between the professions of soldier and robber is a frequent theme of Erasmus and other humanists. See, for example, Erasmus's *Complaint of Peace*, CWE 27:316-17.

<sup>5</sup> In the early sixteenth century, French infantry forces were mainly Swiss mercenaries.

<sup>6</sup> *Morosophi* (transliterated from Greek). The modern word 'sophomore' is the same combination reversed.

<sup>7</sup> Roman history is full of such episodes, dating from the emergence of standing armies, in the first century bce. At the end of the First Punic War (241 bce), the Carthaginians' mercenaries turned on their masters.

you never have war unless you choose it, and peace is always more to be considered than war. Yet this is not the only force driving men to thievery. There is another that, as I see it, applies more specially to you Englishmen.”

‘ “What is that?” said the Cardinal.

‘ “Your sheep”, I said, “that commonly are so meek and eat so little; now, as I hear, they have become so greedy and fierce that they devour human beings themselves.<sup>8</sup> They devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns. For in whatever parts of the land sheep yield the finest and thus the most expensive wool, there the nobility and gentry, yes, and even a good many abbots - holy men - are not content with the old rents that the land yielded to their predecessors. Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive harm. For they leave no land free for the plough: they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping the churches - but only for sheep-barns. And as if enough of your land were not already wasted on game-preserves and forests for hunting wild animals, these worthy men turn all human habitations and cultivated fields back to wilderness. Thus, so that one greedy, insatiable glutton, a frightful plague to his native country, may enclose thousands of acres within a single fence, the tenants are ejected; and some are stripped of their belongings by trickery or brute force, or, wearied by constant harassment, are driven to sell them. One way or another, these wretched people - men, women, husbands, wives, orphans, widows, parents with little children and entire families (poor but numerous, since farming requires many hands) - are forced to move out. They leave the only homes familiar to them, and can find no place to go. Since they must leave at once without waiting for a proper buyer, they sell for a pittance all their household goods, which would not bring much in any case. When that little money is gone (and it’s soon spent in wandering from place to place), what finally remains for them but to steal, and so be hanged - justly, no doubt - or to wander and beg? And yet if they go tramping, they are jailed as idle vagrants. They would be glad to work, but they can find no one who will hire them. There is no need for farm labour, in which they have been trained, when there is no land left to be planted. One herdsman or shepherd can look after a

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<sup>8</sup> This vivid image introduces Hythloday’s treatment of the social dislocation brought about by enclosure - the gradual amalgamation and fencing, over a period extending from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, of the open fields of the feudal system: one incentive to enclosure was the increasing profitability of the wool trade. Hythloday’s strongly negative view of the practice was widely shared when More wrote, and in 1517-18 Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, conducted a large-scale inquiry into its extent and consequences.



flock of beasts large enough to stock an area that used to require many hands to make it grow crops.

“This enclosing has led to sharply rising food prices in many districts. Also, the price of raw wool has risen so much that poor people among you who used to make cloth can no longer afford it, and so great numbers are forced from work to idleness. One reason is that after so much new pastureland was enclosed, rot killed a countless number of the sheep – as though God were punishing greed by sending on the beasts a murrain that rightly should have fallen on the owners! But even if the number of sheep should increase greatly, the price will not fall a penny, because the wool trade, though it can’t be called a monopoly because it isn’t in the hands of a single person, is concentrated in so few hands (an oligopoly, you might say), and these so rich, that the owners are never pressed to sell until they have a mind to, and that is only when they can get their price.

‘ “For the same reason other kinds of livestock are also priced exorbitantly, the more so because, with farmhouses being torn down and farming in decay, nobody is left to breed the animals. These rich men will not breed calves as they do lambs, but buy them lean and cheap, fatten them in their pastures, and then sell them dear. I don’t think the full impact of this bad system has yet been felt. We know these dealers hurt consumers where the fattened cattle are sold. But when, over a period of time, they keep buying beasts from other localities faster than they can be bred, a gradually diminishing supply where they are bought will inevitably lead to severe shortages. So your island, which seemed specially fortunate in this matter, will be ruined by the crass avarice of a few. For the high cost of living causes everyone to dismiss as many retainers as he can from his household; and what, I ask, can these men do but rob or beg? And a man of courage is more easily persuaded to steal than to beg.

‘ “To make this miserable poverty and scarcity worse, they exist side by side with wanton luxury. The servants of noblemen, tradespeople, even some farmers – people of every social rank – are given to ostentatious dress and gourmandising. Look at the cook-shops, the brothels, the bawdy houses and those other places just as bad, the wine-bars and ale-houses. Look at all the crooked games of chance like dice, cards, backgammon, tennis, bowling and quoits, in which money slips away so fast. Don’t all these pastimes lead their devotees straight to robbery? Banish these blights, make those who have ruined farmhouses and villages restore them or hand them over to someone who will restore and rebuild. Restrict the right of the rich to buy up anything

and everything, and then to exercise a kind of monopoly.<sup>9</sup> Let fewer people be brought up in idleness. Let agriculture be restored, and the wool-manufacture revived as an honest trade, so there will be useful work for the idle throng, whether those whom poverty has already made thieves or those who are only vagabonds or idle servants now, but are bound to become thieves in the future.

“Certainly, unless you cure these evils it is futile to boast of your justice in punishing theft. Your policy may look superficially like justice, but in reality it is neither just nor expedient. If you allow young folk to be abominably brought up and their characters corrupted, little by little, from childhood; and if then you punish them as grown-ups for committing the crimes to which their training has consistently inclined them, what else is this, I ask, but first making them thieves and then punishing them for it?”

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<sup>9</sup> A number of laws to control gambling and ale-houses, regulate dress, restrict monopolies, and provide for the rebuilding of towns and the restoration of pastures to tillage were in fact passed, with small result, in the reigns of both Henry VII and Henry VIII.

# From Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (2010)

## Civic Humanism

The roots of the second important interpretation of humanism go back to the thirties. In his research, Hans Baron placed the originality and historical importance of humanism in a subcurrent of the movement that he termed “civic humanism.” According to Baron, civic humanism emerged in Florence at the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century as a fusion of the *Petrarchean humanism* of the trecento with the civic tradition of the medieval Italian communes.

...

According to Baron, Petrarchean humanism was a nostalgic classicist literary movement steeped in medieval notions, most notably adhering to the ideal of the *vita contemplativa*. As such, the humanism of the trecento tended to fetishize the classical heritage and could, at best, slavishly imitate the original. The synthesis of civic values and classicism in civic humanist thought gave birth to a new approach. The civic humanists employed classical notions, texts, and genres as instruments for confronting issues and problems endemic to their own society. Their imitation of classical literature was, consequently, critical and creative. Not surprisingly, the civic humanists, in contrast to other humanists, developed a positive view of contemporary vernacular literature and culture.

The new stance of the civic humanists regarding the classical heritage was immanently connected to what Baron sees as comprehensive revolution in their attitude toward human activity and social reality. An example in point is the understanding of economic activity by civic humanism. Although medieval intellectual traditions held diverse views on the subject, it would be accurate to say that practically all of them looked, at the very least, with suspicion on the pursuit of worldly goods. Furthermore, as Baron shows, in trecento Italy, the view of economic activity, accepted by most humanists of the period, was dominated by the attitude of the extreme wing of the Franciscan order and Stoic philosophy which regarded worldly riches with utter contempt. Against this background, the affirmation of economic activity by the civic humanists takes on its full revolutionary significance. Initially,

some humanists, notably the Venetian Francesco Barbaro, employed pragmatic reasoning, arguing that ownership of property is essential for man's familial and social position. Later, Bruni, who translated the pseudo-Aristotelian Economics in 1420-1421, laid the philosophical groundwork for the affirmation of the value of economic activity, by arguing that ownership of property is a condition for the realization of man's humanity and his commitment to society. A similar revolutionary change characterized the attitude of the civic humanists toward marriage and family life. In contrast to the medieval ideals of the monk and the stoic sage, the humanists celebrated family life as an immanent and essential part of human life. Leon Battista Alberti's *Della famiglia* completed the shift of values, consolidating the humanist views concerning both economic activity and family life."

These two new conceptions, the affirmation of the value of economic activity and of marriage and the family, Baron relates to the general civic humanists' challenge to traditional ideals and values, most conspicuously manifested in the rejection of the distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. This distinction, and the precedence given to a life of contemplation and prayer, based as it was on Christian as well as classical conceptions, was central to medieval high culture. Petrarch's and even Salutati's ambivalence regarding the *vita activa*, which stood in contrast to their unequivocal rejection of other common medieval ideas, demonstrates how entrenched this attitude was. Again, the civic humanists of the quattrocento were those who, by the assimilation of Cicero and Aristotle, succeeded in elaborating a theory, which fused intellectual activity with the *vita activa* and unconditionally affirmed the *vivere civile*, that is, man's civic and political life. The basis of this view lay in the notion of a human being, or rather of a free man, as a political animal who can fully realize his *humanitas* only by means of activity in the political body."

Baron further maintains that the civic humanists created the modern discipline of history and, in fact, modern historical consciousness. Leonardo Bruni's path-breaking *History of the Florentine People* demonstrates a critical sensibility as it demolishes the fabulous medieval historical tales and realistically evaluates historical events.<sup>28</sup> In Baron's analysis, beyond these characteristics lies the fundamental modern dimension of humanist historical thought: the refusal to subordinate history to theology and the consequent perception and representation of the past in secular categories. This analysis made it possible to weave discrete historical facts into a coherent narrative and link historical events by postulating causal relationships between them.

History was born as an organic concept, and notions of historical distance and anachronism emerged.

Baron and those who sharpened his insights and developed his conceptualizations argue that these humanist attitudes and values—historical consciousness, the affirmation of the *vivere civile*, and the nonfetishistic attitude toward the classical heritage—were based on distinct presuppositions. The originality and modernity of humanist discourse lay in its nonmetaphysical nature. It understood and represented human reality by concrete, historical and pragmatic categories. It thus rejected the perception of social and political reality as being part of, or reflecting, a transcendent—metaphysical and divine—order of things. Rather, humanist discourse assumed, though often only implicitly, that human reality is a historical and contingent product of human actions, intentions and desires.<sup>30</sup> The affirmation of the *vivere civile* makes sense under the assumptions that political reality is changeable and that fashioning it is an activity worthy of man. If reality is perceived as essentially static, then the worthiest human activity would be understanding and contemplating it, as was indeed the assumption that lay behind the traditional—classical and medieval—superiority attributed to the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*. And the same assumption may easily generate historical consciousness, that is, the perception that there are essential differences between the past and the present.

## From Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980)

It is not, however, the French humanists whom More most resembles but the genius who painted them (and indeed we may speculate that the magnificent achievement of Holbein's portraits of More and his family owes something to the special bond of understanding that we are trying to sketch here). If More's interests embraced astronomy, music, rhetoric, geometry, geography, and arithmetic, he was also profoundly capable of withdrawing from these interests, altering his perspective in such a way as to unsettle any underlying assumptions upon which all these methods of ordering and measuring the world were based. More important still, this engagement and

detachment do not occupy two separate, successive moments in More's career—an early involvement in the world, followed by disillusionment and withdrawal, for example; or even a more complex round of alternating states—but rather are closely bound up with each other throughout his life, while in his greatest works, they are fused with the the intensity and power we have encountered in the Holbein painting. This is above all true, of course, of *Utopia*, whose subtle displacements, distortions, and shifts of perspective are the closest equivalent in Renaissance prose to the anamorphic virtuosity of Holbein's art. Like "The Ambassadors," *Utopia* presents two distinct worlds that occupy the same textual space while insisting upon the impossibility of their doing so. We can neither separate them entirely nor bring them into accord, so that the intellectual gratification of radical discontinuity is as impossible to achieve as the pleasure of wholly integrated form. We are constantly tantalized by the resemblances between England and Utopia analogous to Dinteville's death's-head brooch in relation to the skull—and as constantly frustrated by the abyss that divides them; and no sooner do we confidently take the measure of the abyss than we perceive a new element that seems to establish the unmistakable link between them. This is more than a case of "like in some ways, unlike in others," as if we had two distinct objects that we could hold up to each other and compare, for the two worlds in Utopia occupy the same space and are in an essentially unstable relationship to each other. The division of the work into two books is, in this regard, like one of More's straight-faced jokes, for it invites us to establish a simple order of contrast that the work frustrates: Utopia and its analogues inhabit the world of book I just as England inhabits the world of book II. Similarly, the persona More and Hythlodæus sit in the same garden and converse with each other, but as in Holbein's painting, they cast shadows in different directions and are, in crucial respects, necessarily blind to each other.

This disquieting internal rupture—this sense within the general frame of the work of incompatible perspectives between which the reader restlessly moves—is mirrored at virtually every level of the text, from its largest units of design to its smallest verbal details. Elizabeth McCutcheon has recently called attention to the significance of the latter in a fine discussion of More's extraordinarily frequent use of litotes, a rhetorical figure "in which a thing is affirmed by stating the negative of its opposite." More's use of the figure, she writes, bespeaks "a tendency to see more than one side to a question"; more important, for our purposes, it compels a mental movement, a psychological passage from one point to another and back again. This restless shifting of

perspective is, I would suggest, the close equivalent at the verbal level to the visual technique of anamorphosis, whose etymology itself suggests a back-and-forth movement, a constant forming and re-forming.

## Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- \* Gramsci, A. "The Prince" in *Prison Notebooks* (1935)
- \* Norbrook, D. *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (2009)

- \* Pocock, J.G.A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (2016)
- \* Skinner, Q. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978)
- \* Waley, D. *The Italian City Republics* (1960)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

**<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>**



# *About Notes to Literature*

Notes is an e-learning project that offers personalised higher-education tuition in European literature, history and philosophy. At its core are 12 short courses on modern and classical authors, including (among others) Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, and James Joyce. The courses can be taken on a one-to-one or a small group basis, and starting dates are flexible. Just sign up for modules of interest on the website. Notes was set up with the specific idea of creating a short series of courses that would provide adult and young adult learners with a foundational, integrated and critical study of the history of Western thought and literature. This idea reflects our belief that creative and critical response to this tradition has an important role to play in understanding our current selves and predicaments, as well as in imagining and fashioning our possible futures.

If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at [jonathan@notestoliterature.com](mailto:jonathan@notestoliterature.com) or visit the website: [notestoliterature.com](http://notestoliterature.com).

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



## *About Me : Jonathan Gallagher*

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>