

## Book Review/Compte rendu

Richard J. Schoeck. *The Achievement of Thomas More: Aspects of his Life and Work*. Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies Monograph Series, Number 7, University of Victoria, 1976. Pp. 83.

Richard Schoeck modestly says that this volume is "intended for the non-specialist." Though the book serves this purpose admirably, it does so in a special way. While offering the reader a sound and clarifying outline of More's achievements, it never ignores those ambiguous areas of More's life and work that continue to pose questions for us. In fact the scholarly presentation of such questions is often as valuable as those parts of the book which offer definitions and clear assessments. Chapter one, for instance, introduces a discussion of English law, a subject which, though difficult to define in terms of its relation to More, is nevertheless central to an assessment of his life. Schoeck convincingly challenges the notion "that More detested the legal profession, with its built-in corollary that there must therefore be a split between humanism and the law, between the humanist and the lawyer" (p. 23). In fact an interest in the law seems to have informed the nature and direction of many of the most important ideas reflected in More's literary, historical, and controversial works. Pointing to his numerous contacts with continental jurists, Schoeck reminds us that More was not only a celebrated lawyer of common law but a distinguished student of comparative law, one well-schooled in the tradition that produced Fortescue, Plowden, Coke, and Selden. Indeed, it may have been the breadth of his legal knowledge that recommended More for the role of Chancellor, since the Chancellor's judicial decisions were traditionally governed by a blending of civil and canon as well as common law. More, we know, not only administered this "mixed law" but contributed to its clarification. In order to do so it seems likely that he would have possessed a reasonably sophisticated notion of the principles of each body of law, and in particular those that bore upon the nature of justice and equity, the common origin of law, and the meaning of its complex developments, all of which topics figured prominently in the discussion of continental jurists. But the precise character of More's ideas on these subjects, Schoeck reminds us, has never been adequately defined: "we simply do not know enough about him as a lawyer."

Other areas of More's work seem to promise a fuller record of his thought. However, in moving to a discussion of the *Utopia*, one of More's most important

humanist statements, Schoeck cautions the reader against simple interpretations. With Surtz, Bevington and Sylvester, he treats the book not as the presentation of a homogeneous body of ideas, but as dialogical exploration. The ironic interplay among More's imagined speakers, the allusive and witty character of his Latin style, all serve to intermingle quite different orders of ideas, and not only in the first book of that work, but in the second as well. What More achieved by this was a timely image of philosophy-in-process, and significantly, one which pointed to the possibility of reconciling diverse principles and mixed perspectives. These suggestions are important not only because they contribute to our understanding of the *Utopia* itself, but because they seem to bear out Schoeck's earlier proposal, namely, that in More the lawyer's concern with "mixed law" will be found to be reflected in the humanist's interest in dialogue.

*Richard III*, written about the same time as the *Utopia*, offers an interesting companion study to that work. Without ignoring features of dialogue and dramatic style shared by the two books, Schoeck turns his attention in a slightly different direction, noting the subtle metaphoric patterning which extends the history's range of meaning far beyond that of a mere chronicle. Of particular interest to him is the figure of Jane Shore, toward whom More displays a "remarkable ambivalence," one which occasionally extended to Richard as well. Both figures, Schoeck might have added, fell under severe historical judgement: Jane at the hand of Richard, Richard at the hand of the Tudors. But if More in some way questions their fate, it is not because he doubts their guilt. Noting that "menne of hatred" may have feigned some of the evidence, he nevertheless assumes that most of the charges are true. On the other hand, he is concerned to explore and enlarge the moral perspectives surrounding the judgements, stressing the importance of what others have disregarded about the defendants, and what the judges have ignored about themselves. "Men use if they have an evil turne," he notes, "to write it in marble: and whoso doth us a good turne, we write it in duste." In following these and similar details, the reader finds himself, like some of those assembled before Buckingham at Westminster, or around Hythloday at Antwerp, listening to an ostensibly simple account while hearing other, silent appeals: appeals that point to larger and more varied possibilities of meaning. Though Schoeck has suggested that *Richard III* is a discourse on political power, he might therefore have argued, and with equal truth, that the work reflects another dimension of More's legal thought, namely, his interest in the complex nature of equity and justice.

It is, however, in the controversial works that More's legal interests assume an obvious place of importance. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge of the judicial background of More's battle with the heretics, Schoeck underlines "The immense importance of heresy as a fulcrum in More's political and theological thinking." However, his description of More's ideas on this subject defines only the legal form or occasion of heresy, not the motive for the act itself; and it was an assessment of the underlying motives that seems to have encouraged More, who was by nature a speculative and sometimes daring thinker, to become a prosecutor of protestants in England. Early in his career More was not unreceptive to attacks upon imperfect religious practices or to proposals for church reform. But he remained so only as long as he believed that those who made them sought some fruitful forum for discussion with those who defended received thought and practices. What he grew to

fear was an unwillingness on the part of reformers to engage in reasonable and charitable dialogue. Their "slothfully proud" belief in the univocal nature of truth lay, in his eyes, at the heart of heresy, and shaped his distinctive responses to different spokesmen for very similar heretical notions: Luther's self-confident intelligence he detested; Tyndale's simpler attacks he regretted; toward Frith, who was uncertain, he acted benevolently; and of the Catholic St. Germain he was merely impatient. Schoeck alludes to some of these distinctions but reserves his closest attention for the general alterations of style and character that overtook More's work as the debates unfolded. *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) is "above all else superb dialogue of the Platonic sort: More plays the Socrates to the slower thinking Messenger, who sets forth Luther's position, and like Socrates More leads his protagonist into corners from which there is no exit." But in the debates that followed, the exchanges grew fiercer and any gestures toward play or intellectual exploration were waived for the more tangible advantage of hard polemic. Finally, aware of his inability to match the growing output of the protestant press, More's writings grew feverish and dark, betraying his sense of frustration and fear.

Sanity returned only in 1534 when More was arrested. Then, freed from the close and immediate demands of the reformation debates, More found himself once again free "to roam over the ground of his argument" with friends, with Margaret and other members of his family, but above all with himself. From this period grew a great dialogue and "one of the greatest works of consolation in all of western literature": *A Dialogue of Comfort*. In it, Schoeck suggests, More rose above the historicity of his and his age's tribulations, and through a retiring sage set his thoughts upon an image of deliverance. But it should be remembered that there is a second speaker, as well: a young man who must address difficult obligations within history; and these, More seems to say, define as well as confine the individual who meets them. Like all that is best in More, therefore, this work looks in more than one direction, and blends the different perspectives into a rich and complex mixture.

There is much that is autobiographical in *A Dialogue of Comfort*. Though set in Christian Hungary before the Turkish invasion of 1529, the book clearly alludes to the religious struggles that surrounded More in 1535. Yet it is a more personal book even than this: through the young man and the old sage More touched upon the varied but interrelated aspects of his own life. In that life, lawyer and martyr, realist and visionary all played different parts; but like the living youth and the dying sage of the *Dialogue*, each was drawn into contact with his opposite. The successful intermingling of such diverse orders of experiences demanded extraordinary intellectual vigilance on More's part, and of a kind that rarely led toward simplicity. Among the virtues of Richard Schoeck's study is that it teaches us something of this vigilant complexity, while reminding us that through his varied life and art, More realized a single and consistent achievement.

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