Consilium et timor mortis: On Speaking, Writing and Silence in "Utopia"

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"Quasi consilii sit res."

This fragment ascribed to Caesar may stand as a motto for the notion expounded here: that philosophers giving advice to princes entered dangerous territory, because speaking truthfully to them reminded rulers of what was precarious in their lives and regimes.

It was a Renaissance commonplace that princes were more amenable to flattery than truth, and for a man of Thomas More's sensibility the record was filled with confirming evidence. On the literary side, he need look no further than his own writings. From the English and Latin poems through the Tower Works, we find embodied the idea that princes were no friends to truth. More showed his hatred for tyranny and his concern about honest counsel in the Progymnasmata and Epigrammata and in his History of Richard III. Were it the case that we lacked the evidence of Utopia, we would still have a substantial body of material upon which to exercise our interpretative powers.1

The topic fascinated More's contemporaries and later Tudor writers, and it may be that Hooker had it in mind when he said he had written his great book so that the truth would not pass away "as if in a dream." There is a hint here of the need to put into writing things risky presented in speech. To observe the political world of princes closely and talk about it carried with it the danger that a hostile princely construction would be put upon speech while the speaker lacked safe distance from the ruler's wrath. This truth Lord Hastings discovered when, according to More, he lost his head over an 'if.'2

Hexter's remarks on problems adjunct to counsel thus carry weight, when he claims that the problem of counsel was a function of the internal structure and workings of actual royal councils subject to pressures from the
powerful within and without. These pressures acted on members to prevent councils from being disintegrated symposia on politics. Every spoken word was itself an event and action, in an age when the residue of the mental habits of an oral culture did not facilitate modern distinctions between the efficacy of words and deeds. In the conditions of Tudor politics, the dangers inherent in speaking or even writing about some things is evident when we consider what is not mentioned in such a vast collection as the Lisle Letters — for example, any comment on More’s execution or Queen Anne’s.

The problem of licit modes of political expression rubs off on the problem of modes of participation in politics. And this is what I want to comment on here, turning to the ikastic parts of Book I of Utopia, in particular the “dialogue on counsel,” where even modern revisionism, having shed the “authorial self” borrowed from Romanticism, remains tied to what Michael Bristol has called a “richly textured social integument or self,” a recognizable “subjectivity.”

This residual subjectivity has encouraged scholars to depict Hythloday as a sullen zealot, a man without self-knowledge, a man withdrawn from political life. Sylvester, in his famous “Si Hythlodaeo credimus,” described Hythloday as an ideologue of totalitarian leanings. He provided a template for reductionist readings by other writers whose usual sensitivity to a dialogue provoked them to try to lessen the distance between the alleged “authorial self” and the linguistic conventions, social pressures, and political power behind the play of words in Renaissance dialogue.

One aspect of this reductionism has been the interpretation of the “dialogue on counsel” in Utopia as forcing a choice between Morus and Hythloday as polar types. Choosing Morus’s side inscribes the conviction that participation in public office was necessary to meet fully the obligation from classical theory, Italian Renaissance treatises, and their translation into the circumstances of the monarchical society of England.

Here I will re-examine Hythloday’s stance against political life, focusing on the dramatic and angry exchanges between Morus and Hythloday in which honesty (honestas) and utility (utilitas) are as much in conflict as are the speakers.

II

It is important to see the differences between Morus and Hythloday in their textual context. They reach the critical point after three episodes of political discourse: the frame section, in which we meet the speakers; the
consequent inner dialogue on counsel set in Morton’s court, where Hythloday had encountered the historical More’s political mentor; and the set of though experiments narrated by Hythloday. Only then do Morus and Hythloday join the issue in earnest.

Morus rejects and rebuts every defense of Hythloday’s seeming refusal to participate in politics or to serve the commonwealth by other means. Hythloday seems to reject every argument from prudence and obligation. The prevailing rule seems to be tertium non datur. Morus states categorically that Hythloday’s “scholastic philosophy” has no place in the councils of kings. What Morus calls a “more civic philosophy” must have precedence. Hythloday, stung by the epithet “scholastic,” responds angrily, arguing that what Morus has praised as prudence – speech that knows its stage and considers time and place – is mere dissembling.

Morus elaborates, arguing against speech out of place in terms made familiar by Erasmus’s revival of the classical topic ‘servire scenae,’ most effectively in the tropes about confusing the actions of tragedy and comedy. Morus claims that to come on stage speaking Seneca’s lines of reproach to Nero from the Octavia while a comedy by Plautus is being played would embody just such confusion.

Morus draws the lesson that it would have been better to remain silent than to utter inappropriate words. If a player finds silence unacceptable, then we must perform the part assigned: “Whatever play is being performed... do not upset it all simply because you think of another one which has more interest. So it is in the commonwealth. So it is in the deliberations of monarchs. If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the root... yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth...”

More’s use of the dramatic metaphor poses the problem of counsel and obligation as a dichotomy between speaking and remaining silent. It provides for Morus the basis for his dogged effort to convince Raphael to participate in public business. By playing the assigned part with tact, one obtains the result of “making as little bad what cannot be made good.”

Hythloday vehemently rejects this prudential counsel: “If I were to stick to the truth, I must needs speak in the manner I have described... Although this speech of mine might perhaps become unwelcome and disagreeable to those councillors, yet I cannot see why it should seem odd even to the point of folly.” Hythloday elaborates his play on folly by cloaking himself in sacred authority, arguing that if he were to avoid declaring what is perverse in the practices of people of corrupted morals then all the doctrines of Christ must be dissembled: “Yet he forbade us to dissemble them to the extent that
what he had whispered into the ears of his disciples he commanded them to preach openly from the housetops...”

Dissembling would in any case be of no avail in a princely court. There, in face-to-face encounters, direct and open speech must approve the worst ideas and endorse the most ruinous decrees. Dissenters were written down as spies or traitors and were in danger of their lives. Far from achieving anything of public utility, an honest man in council would be himself corrupted. Or, were he able somehow to maintain his integrity silently, he would of necessity become a “screen for the wickedness and folly of others.”

Hythloday, sensing an advantage, perhaps because Morus offers no rebuttal of the argument from the example of Christ’s charge to the disciples, perhaps mindful of Augustine’s advocacy in Contra Academicos, enlarges his claim. He argues that Plato taught wisely, that philosophers were right in abstaining from the administration of commonwealths. And he concludes with a warning: pressures of conformity in the councils of princes produce a social amnesia concerning the good news philosophers bring – an obvious parallel to the good news of the evangelists.

Not a few commentators have argued that these passages show once more Hythloday’s inability to understand his own experience. His citation of the Gospel story is said to be as contradictory of Hythloday’s new arguments for refusing office as was his failure to understand Morton’s readiness to hear him and experiment in the episode set in the cardinal’s court? How can Raphael not see that he is under the same obligation to utter his truth in public as the disciples were?

Such readings are problematic because they fail to take into account exactly how Hythloday’s part in the exchange is qualified by earlier, overlooked utterances that expose an alternative to the exclusive choice between otium and negotium and qualify Hythloday’s resistance to Morus.

Hythloday repeated Plato’s argument from The Republic and the Seventh Epistle, that there could be no useful role in the councils of princes for philosophers. These were arguments of time and place:

“But, doubtless Plato was right in foreseeing that if kings themselves did not turn to philosophy, they would never approve of the advice of real philosophers because they have been from their youth saturated and infected with the wrong ideas. This truth he found from his own experience with Dionysius. If I proposed beneficial measures to some king and tried to uproot from his soul the seeds of corruption, do you not suppose that I would be forthwith banished or treated with ridicule.”
Or worse yet, if we think the quotation contains within it some backward glance to Seneca’s reproach to Nero and his subsequent death.

At the very least, Hythloday’s quotation has as its occasion Morus’s ironic, sarcastic, and accusative reference to Plato: “Your favorite author, Plato, is of the opinion that commonwealths will be happy only if either philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy. What a distant prospect of happiness there will be if philosophers will not condescend even to impart their counsel to kings.” To this Hythloday replies: “Philosophers are not so ungracious... that they would not gladly do it — in fact, many have already done it in published books — if the rulers would be ready to take good advice.”

Hence every one of the replies and rejoinders in the debate between Morus and Hythloday is subfused with ironies of intention and outcome. Seneca, Christ, and Socrates met their deaths after episodes of unwelcome truth-telling. The argument about silence and speaking is haunted by death at every turn.

III

This raises a question about a possible third way, and in the remainder of this paper my argument explores the thesis tertium datur!

In his stubborn rejoinders, Hythloday stands in good fictive Tudor company. Consider the argument made by Starkey’s characters Lupset and Pole in the Dialogue. Lupset holds fast to his conviction that the wise man is never a private person. Pole knows this remark is aimed at him and answers with an argument much like Hythloday’s, quoting Plato and insisting that, if a good king is absent, “al couseyl ys voyd and nevar can take place....” Pole maintained that in so saying he had not refused to take a part, despite his allegiance to Plato.

As Starkey represents him, Pole had vowed to spare no effort of discourse in meeting his obligation to the commonwealth, promising “nevar to pretermyt occasyon nor tyme of helpyng my coutrey” and further saying he would “endeavour alwaies for the settyng forthe of the true common wele.” But to do this and to take office were different things entirely. Pole in fact neither withdrew permanently from political life nor accepted office in England. However, he wrote copiously on the problems of politics and reform — much to Henry VIII’s discomfort, despite the fact that his royal cousin had placed a price on his head.
Erasmus had already pointed to the way of advising princes by writing, alluding to Plutarch in the *Education of a Christian Prince*. But it was Elyot who cited Plutarch explicitly on the point, after omitting in either *Pasquill the Playne* or *Of the Knowledge Which Maketh a Wise Man* a single instance of effective counsel. In Book I of the *Governor* Elyot retold Plutarch’s tale of the advice given to Ptolemy by Demetrius of Phalerum concerning the reading of books dealing with the office of king and ruler, while giving also the moral Demetrius put on the fable: “Those things which the king’s friends are not bold enough to recommend to them [in speech] are written in books.” This example gains in significance from Conrad’s observation, that in the proem to *Of the Knowledge Which Maketh a Wise Man*, Elyot applied the dictum to his own situation in respect of Henry VIII. While the *Governor* had generally not been favorably regarded, Elyot described the king as “benignly receiving my book ...with princely words full of majesty,” noting that Henry commended Elyot’s diligence, simplicity and courage “in that I spared none estate in the rebuke of vice.”

Elyot needed courage to draw then a lesson for his own time. Henry’s goodness recalled the example of Antoninus, the type of the philosopher-prince who paid double wages to a homely man unafraid to rebuke any other, in the belief that a prince’s vices were more easily seen by others than by himself. This Elyot glossed by saying princes had more occasion for error than others, and hence more need of true friends or true instruction. The lack of such friends and instruction was fatal to good rule.

The point strikes close to home in Conrad’s view, because Elyot intended the *Governor* to “counteract a perceived negligence in Henry’s present counsellors and companions.” This negligence itself was the main burden of Hythloday’s argument in Book I of *Utopia*. There, the matter of counsel is under constant transformation. If the inner dialogue at Morton’s court presents an example of neglect overcome through a *conversio animae* of the sort Elyot hoped to achieve and Antoninus embodied, Plato’s experience at Syracuse and Raphael’s encounters in the real and imaginary courts described in his travel narratives set forward failed hopes.

One might strengthen the lesson, pointing to More’s direct statements on Henry VII in the Coronation Day poems, but there is a more important passage in *Utopia* bearing directly on the point. Hythloday had earlier explained his return to Europe from Utopia by admitting an obligation to instruct the receptive about the best state of a commonwealth: “I lived there more than five years and would never have returned except to make known that new world.”
Back in Europe, he had to weigh the dangers arising from direct speech against the possible advantage to the commonwealth. He had in mind the danger of the corruption of judgment in princely courts. Morus might suppose the "more civic philosophy" alone had utility. If so, then prudence wins out over honesty. But the philosopher was under obligations to withstand mere calculations of interest and success in affairs in the conditions Hythloday had described – in which real rulers neither embody justice nor desired it.

Hythloday therefore affirmed the philosopher's burden in politics, even where the demands of honesty are such that the requirements of utility cannot be met directly. He did not accede to urgings to take a place in a king's council. Nor did he simply retreat from engagement. Hythloday chose instead to tell his story about right order in a commonwealth.

Telling the story was attractive to him because it provided a meaningful third way between withdrawal from the arena of politics and participation having some promise of utility. Plato had found a like path in the wake of his experiences at Athens and Syracuse, which prevented him from meeting the expectation he had as a young man: that he would hold office at Athens. The death of Socrates, the rule of the Tyrants, and the Democracy had convinced Plato he could not both preserve his honesty and achieve any public good through service in the existing regime. Plato turned instead to the heroic labor of constructing the Academy and producing the dialogues in which the limits of the problem of counsel were defined for the ancient world and its heirs.

To appreciate fully Hythloday's notion of service through writing, we must add to Hexter's cautionary remarks about councils insights drawn from recent accounts of the heavy pressures for conformity in oral cultures and their residues in cultures of primary literacy in the age of the printing press. These were especially strong in the councils of princes, where the pressure for conformity affected perception and conception and blurred the distinction between word and act because of the potency of speech under censorship in court settings.

To speak to others about reform in politics was in the most naked sense of the word to re-invent their world. A voiced truth challenged a regime logically and ontologically, because political speaking and writing were intensely poetic actions – filled with the power to remake things.

In dialogue every "if" clause embodied hope, and every future tense could make life itself depend on the situation to which speakers and writers entrusted their dreams, their desire for change, their belief in deliverance from oppression and arbitrary power. Writing intensified the challenge to regimes
because its fixity defied the momentary character of speech, which was in any case subject not simply to rebuttal and deliberate distortion from the pressure of opinion and contrary doctrine prevailing in councils. Political speech might entail the death of the speaker.

To measure the “dialogue on counsel” we must pay very close attention to this danger perceived by Hythloday and the weight he attaches to counselling princes in writing. Writing allowed the invention of a part playable against the grain of current prescription. When the public arena cannot not bear the logical and ontological weight of honest speech, recourse to writing may be the only avenue of participation open to the Stranger whose message neither the prince nor his councillors will welcome.

Participation, speech, silence and writing occupy in Plato’s dialogues a fictional space stalked by death, and we may benefit from comparing their time and space to the chronotope More created in Utopia. There, death dominates the reports of honest speech drawn from the lives of Socrates, Christ and Seneca. And the messenger Hythloday may well seek a third way, a useful way, by which to meet his political obligations.

Void of confidence that in office honesty and utility can coincide, Hythloday puts his faith in speaking, and even more in writing, in language itself, which when expelled from silence and embodied in print does its irreparable work.

Printed writing allows reading in private. Unlike oral counsel which exists in public space, the written word, and especially the word in print, may in a private place pierce the hard shell of the institutionalized corruption within which princes live. That done, it may reveal to them the anxiety of life in the embrace of lies and work toward that conversion which is the heart of Hythloday’s platonic talk about politics and which intersects More’s purposeful play with the idea of faithfully reporting the Stranger’s conversations and getting them ready for the press.

In conclusion, it is essential to recognize that dramatic dialogue creates and sustains a special time and place to express political ideas. It supplies a political ‘stage’ as text, a thing left behind after the stage has been struck. Hence our effort to appropriate meanings from such dialogues is an historical task and must account for the co-existence within a literary milieu of radically alternative constructions of the world. Because dramatic dialogues are investigative discussions rather than rhetorical displays only, they exhibit a tension in which meanings are not such that they cancel out each other, as mutually exclusive choices.
Even less are dramatic dialogues reducible in their rich complementarity to the victory of one political ideology over another, or to mere vehicles of social mobility serving self-fashioning. There is more at issue in Book One of Utopia than can be contained in More’s pathos in the face of the dilemmas of opposition: the path taken so many years later, or the path refused – submission to a power subversive of the integrity and magnitude of More’s spirit.

I have argued for a view of the ‘dialogue on counsel’ as one with the highest degree of openness, one that is anti-systematic and anti-ideological in Paul Ricoeur’s sense. Dialogic polyvalence is not simply an aesthetic strategy of ambiguity. It is a mode of representing a genuine conflict, in which paths may diverge radically and reflect the plenitude of past utterances in shaping an actor’s present utterances.

I find in Utopia a complex mimicry of authority conceived as the power of traditions of past speech and writing to shape present speech as action – to disseminate thought. Hythloday is in this way an ‘author’, as that word derives from augere. As More’s creature, he is concerned with growth, increase and augmentation, as these words refer to the power of creative utterance and the shaping of action in the world. I refer here to the state of quality of being an author, an originator or creator. Nothing better locates Hythloday within Utopia than this sense of auctor – even if in the parerga he requires More’s secretarial services.

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Notes
I want to acknowledge a special debt to Professor Paul Fideler who frequently gave generously of his time in reading my drafts and helping to improve them, from 1987 to the weeks before the paper amplified here was given at the Renaissance Society of America Meetings, 7 April 1990 (Toronto). In the footnotes below all references are to the Yale edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More.


2. Richard Hooker, Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, 2 volumes, ed. Christopher Morris (London, 1954), I, 77. See Arthur B. Ferguson, Clio Unbound (Durham, 1979), 207–222, on change, historical relativism, and Hooker’s concern to preserve the useful past in the face of threats to it. Also, CW II, 48 11. 20–25.


of the lexicon in its English context and in relating language to actual texts, against the 'school' deriving from Pocock and Skinner; see chs. 2 & 5 and pp. 9–11 and 125–27.

11. CW IV, 99/5–35.


14. CW IV, 101/1–2.

15. CW IV, 101/5–14.


17. CW IV, 103/78 and 13–14.

18. CW IV, 103/16–18, and 24; 105/23; 109/12–14.


20. The best work remains the classical study by H. Gomperz, Sophistik und Rhetorik (Wien, 1912). Eric Voegelin, The World of the Polis (Baton Rouge, 1957), ch. 11, provides a brilliant critique.


22. CW IV, 87/11–15 and the earliest example, 85/10–15; see the commentary and survey of Renaissance texts by Surtz, pp. 34809.


24. Thomas F. Mayer, ed. Thomas Starkey: A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset (London, 1989), pp. 1–16, for the challenge by Lupset and his references to Plato, the theory of obligation rooted in birth and education for the common good, and the beginning of Pole's consideration of office, learning, and withdrawal. Pole points constantly to the dangers of meddling, including prison and death, referring to Plato's enslavement by Dionysius (p. 15). His reference to the absence of the good king and its effect on counsel occurs much later, on p. 132. This magnificent edition, based on the closest study yet of the surviving ms., surpasses all others and makes them impossible to use for serious textual study. I want to thank Professor Mayer for his generous criticism of my ideas.


28. Conrad, “A Preservation Against Tyranny: Sir Thomas Elyot and the Rhetoric of Counsel,” p. 11 and fn. 58. This paper was kindly lent to me by Professor Conrad, but the analysis is much amplified in his Ph.D thesis, “A Preservation Against Tyranny: The Political Theology of Sir Thomas Elyot” (Johns Hopkins, 1988; unpublished). This is now the best study of the politics and theology of friendship in relation to counsel and councils in Elyot’s works. I want to thank Professor Conrad for the comments and criticism he has offered and especially the loan of his thesis, from which I have benefitted in ways far larger than the following analysis.


31. *Idem*.


34. CW IV, 107; cf. pp. 21, 25, 29 and 43.

35. CW IV, 101–103.

36. CW IV, 55–57.

37. T. I. White, “Plato and Utopia,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*. Within the text the platonism of Hythloday is carefully developed and very explicitly comment upon: CW IV, 21/4–5, 39/10–15, 49/36–51/4, 87–11–23, 103/16–18, 105/4–8 and elsewhere. Starkey referred to the good ruler as “the lyffely law” and “lyffely reason,” perhaps looking back to the legists and their dicta (*lex est naturae vis et lex est ratio mundi*) as well as to platonic sources and the deeply Christian notion of Christ as the *logos*. Plato’s concern for the claims of experts in politics is evident in the *Ion* 531d-537c, but especially in the last paragraph cited the criticism is fierce. In the *Protagoras* Plato
directly criticizes the techne claimed by the Sophists, through Hippocrates who says derisively that Sophists have the art of making clever speakers (312d). Socrates, feigning ignorance, asks: “about what” do they speak (peri tinos) [312e]. Protagoras answers: about the art of politics (318e). The master work remains Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, 3 volumes (New York, 1943–45); see I, 286–331, II, 87–159, and III, 182–1996. I, 286ff, for Jaeger’s examination of the fifth century tensions over the question “what type of education leads to arete (virtue)?” For the answer of Protagoras see I, 293–299. Voegelin, The World of the Polis, pp. 271–291.

38. Seventh Letter 324b–326b, gives the autobiographical account. Apology 24a–26a, gives the details of the charge by Meltc. This charge of impiety is the one which Socrates is found guilty: 36a. See both the Seventh Letter and the Eighth Letter, for the episodes belonging to the early years: especially 389/388. The later Sicilian adventures are not meant here: 366/365 & 361/360. See also, Gorgias 490a–b; cf. Seventh Letter 335d.


40. George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago, 1989), pp. 55–6. Every student interested in Steiner’s application of his general theory on Renaissance texts should read Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman (New York, 1977), a book focused on language and politics, the pressures on speech and writing from regimes of total domination, and the problem of cultural decay when utility and honesty cannot co-exist.


42. Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, tr. M. Holquist and C. Emerson (Austin, 1981), develops the idea of the chronotope to express his sense of the radical experience of temporal and spatial openness to novelty in Renaissance dialogue and symbolic forms of speech. He is concerned to explain why methods of organizing time and space undergo a pronounced shift in the Hellenistic era and in the Renaissance. Bakhtin applies the concept to “texts” that appear especially threatening to received opinions because they are multivocal. He often draws attention to More’s Utopia in developing his ideas about the threat to the polis from all forms of language that are polysemic and heteroglossic.

43. The phrase is Steiner’s, Real Presences, p. 58. For an argument about the necessity of “Utopia” as a corrective to any prevailing ideology, see Paul Ricoeur, Lectures on Ideology and Utopia (Chicago, 1983).

44. There is much play on this point in the parerga: CW IV, pp. 2, 5, 13, 21, 25, 27 and 39–45 (More to Giles). I cannot develop here the complex idea and textual history of
More's action and the fiction by which the person More appears as the persona Hythloday's "secretary" or "reporter" — with special concentration on the "translation" of speech to print. O. B. Hardison has some interesting observations on the paradox inherent in making permanent what is temporal, in his *The Enduring Moment* (Chapel Hill, 1962).

45. My conclusions here rest heavily on a theory Ricoeur has developed fully in *Lectures*. 