
**REVIEW**  
Alvaro Silva

Cicero, Seneca, Lucian, Tacitus, and other ancient writers were towering presences in Thomas More’s intellectual formation, the humanist shaping of his mind. Years of reading and studying in the “liberal arts”, or “arts of liberty”, as the author of this scholarly and highly appreciative book has it, led More to see in *humanitas* the proper virtue of humankind, and women were not excluded as his three daughters well knew. His debt to these authors of classical antiquity is evident in his work, and a book like this is all the more welcome since some of these early writings tend to go unnoticed. The book is also a reminder for those among More’s coreligionists, who while praising the martyr’s devotion, pay little or no attention to the Christian man who sought wisdom in pagan authors and who was every day of his life a concerned citizen of London. Indeed, one of the pleasures of Wegemer’s book is to see More making connections in his thinking and drawing inspiration from life in his beloved city by the Thames.

Wegemer is the founder and director of the Center for Thomas More Studies at the University of Dallas, where he is a professor of English. He regularly contributes to this journal. (His essay on More’s family portrait printed in the book was first published in *Moreana.*) He finds More’s scholarship about four
hundred years behind any other comparable English figure, a correct opinion in 1935, but perhaps a bit exaggerated after the completion of the critical edition of the Yale Edition of his works, a project started in 1958. The second half of the twentieth century knew an explosion of serious interest in the man and his work. We know him and his age better than ever before. In our age of rapid transitions and volatility, it may be hard to assess the future of More’s relevance or even G.K. Chesterton’s dictum about it. In any case, he will remain a superb figure of English humanism and a fascinating Roman Catholic layman.

Reading this book is a reminder of how much More owed to all those “pagan” thinkers and historians, a homage also to his masters in *studia humanitatis*. Indeed, much in Cicero and Seneca and Lucian, to name only those authors most frequently mentioned in Wegemer’s book, is as relevant today as it was long ago, and the modern world (not only politicians) loses much in ignoring them. I have never read More’s translations of Lucian’s poems without imagining him wishing to have been the author himself, admiring Lucian’s common sense and respect for truth, perhaps the best reason for the labor of translating four of them. These translations were his most popular literary work (at least in number of editions in More’s lifetime), outselling *Utopia*. Wegemer also gives a close and careful reading of the earliest poems, dialogues, *The life of Pico* (a compendium of spiritual principles that More kept up through life, according to Wegemer), and the “Coronation Ode”. Naturally, given the idea of the essays, his interest is mostly on the “political epigrams” rather than on others that twist the more popular pious image of the English apologist and martyr. Perhaps More’s freedom of expression in those epigrams speaks also of a much needed “arts of liberty” in church matters, ecclesiastical or theological. I found the chapters on the *Life of Richard III* and *Utopia* particularly illuminating. Renaissance writers were educators at heart and there can be little
doubt that More wrote his famous best seller, as Wegemer understands, “to exercise our sharp-sightedness in prudent assessment”. *Utopia*’s dialectical character, he writes, “is designed for a self-education that genuinely equips citizens to value their liberty and to learn what is needed for its existence”. Sound deliberation indeed is what is needed in those who govern, and everyone else, too, in as much as we govern our very lives.

But the young More of the book’s title was not that young (he was thirty-seven or thirty-eight) at the writing of *Utopia*. As I approached the last pages, a question took my mind away from the young More onto the older More, or perhaps more precisely, the More after Luther, only a few years into what would be known as the Reformation, the transforming event in European Christendom and culture, and yet one that the English humanist perceived as nothing but a prideful and stubborn rebellion against the only true Church. In fact, Wegemer ends his book with a double question mark that seemed to answer my own questioning, “Would he [More] live up to that challenge in the tempestuous years to follow? And would England?” Is he perhaps announcing another collection of essays on old Thomas More and the arts of liberty? I doubt Wegemer would go for the theory of the “deeply divided soul”, the central theme in Richard Marius’s biography. And yet, his two questions necessitate an interpretation of More’s work, political and ecclesial or theological. When the Lutheran rebellion hit the land, was More (supposedly not young anymore but well formed in “sound deliberation”) intelligent and prudent enough fully to abide by his humanistic training and vision to see another way to deal with the “new” writers as he called them, a way perhaps closer to Erasmus? Reading the chapter on More’s “political poems” of 1509-1516, I remembered at least one on ecclesiastical corruption, a joke to be sure, but nevertheless with intent and sound deliberation. During his humanistic reading and formation, Church reform was
not less important for More than government reform or political prudence, and it would remain so for a while, a concern expanded with tremendous force in his extraordinary Letter to a Monk, written in 1519. Then, it almost seems that Luther put an end to that and More became the tireless apologist of the old faith. A man who had drunk in the liberal arts could only look with shock and perplexity at the new idea of sola scriptura and his Dialogue Concerning Heresies testifies to that disgust, and yet the modern reader of More the apologist notes a certain absence in his systematic defence of the Catholic truth. Perhaps neither his classical formation nor his own Christian faith prepared him for that, the unexpected, and that was precisely the crisis in Christianity. Soon, the man who loved Cicero and Seneca and Lucian, would give all his time and energy to defend everything that was in any way connected with the Church, an unchanging Church, perhaps forgetting or unaware of the supreme and ever living “arts of liberty” in the everlasting faith.

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