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CHAPTER ONE

As we must take this haunting perception of

by seriously, not, in other words, simply as a

conventional turn of phrase, but as a central

idea to existence. It is a response he shared, like

Erasmus, whose Praise of Folly is its supreme

expression. But The Praise of Folly is a dangerous

response to life, in part because of the

ines between Erasmus and More (the former a

patient with confinement; the latter a dis-

satisfied with liberty), in part because of the

very of Erasmus’s great work. Only when we

acknowledge, flexibility, and charm of the literary

ous instability over which it triumphed can

aging as a lived experience is the sense of the

for More a profound alienation from his

er part of his acquaintance, from himself. It

enously valued attachments to family and

in himself the perspective of the London

he had lived, without vow, for four years,

not only the ceremonies of the great but

vements seemed to him manifestations of

, on my faith,” he told his daughter in

if it had not been for my wife and you that

1 accompt the chief part of my charge, I

long ere this to have closed myself in as

later too.”

should not be permitted to efface the dis-

off this summary utterance at the end of his

is responding in a characteristically brilliant

way to the horrible conditions in which

consolves his grieving daughter by trans-

inflicted upon him into a gift, in effect

choice. (And indeed that destiny was in a

vice, though not a choice he actively sought

more than comfort against tribulation here;

et, More gives voice to a lifelong current of

duced in his mind to madness, a rejection

de, cruelty, and ambition of men, but of

edium to cherish, a desire to escape into the

ent, this attitude should not doubt be traced

to More than to the style of late medieval

shiver of revulsion against the world it

nonetheless embraced. But our knowledge of More’s participa-

tion in a larger cultural mood should not diminish our sensitivity to

its actual effect in his life and writings.

To grasp the precise character of what I have called More’s es-

trangement, we might compare it with the mood evoked by Hol-

bein’s famous work “The Ambassadors” (see frontispiece), painted

in London two years before More’s execution. Jean de Dinteville,

seigneur de Polisy and Francis I’s ambassador to the English court,

and his friend Georges de Selve, shortly to be bishop of Lavaur,

stand at either side of a two-shelved table. They are young, suc-

cessful men, whose impressively wide-ranging interests and ac-

complishments are elegantly recorded by the objects scattered

with careful casualness on the table: celestial and terrestrial

globes, sundials, quadrants and other instruments of astronomy

and geometry, a lute, a case of flutes, a German book of arithmetic,

kept open by a square, and an open German hymn book, on

whose pages may be seen part of Luther’s translation of the “Veni

Creator Spiritus” and his “Shortened Version of the Ten Com-

mandments.” The hymn book suggests more, of course, than the

interest in music that is elsewhere indicated; its presence in the

portrait of two important Catholic statesmen may signal the

French king’s attempt, by cynically advancing the Lutheran cause

in England, to further tension between Henry VIII and the em-

peror Charles V, or, alternatively, it may mark that moment in

European history in which it still seemed possible to cultivated

good of will that the Catholic Church and the Reformers could

meet on common ground and resolve their differences. If More

had once harbored such a hope, the moment for him was long

past.

Dinteville and Selve are depicted in the context of the highest

hopes and achievements of their age. The objects on the table

between them, set off splendidly by the rich Turkish cloth and the

esquisite mosaic pavement, represent a mastery of the Quad-

rivium, that portion of the Seven Liberal Arts comprising Music,

Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy, while a mastery of the

Trivium—Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric—is implied by the very

profession of the two figures. They are thus in possession of the

instruments—both literal and symbolic—by which men bring the

world into focus, represent it in proper perspective. Indeed, in

addition to their significance as emblems of the Liberal Arts, the

objects on the table virtually constitute a series of textbook illus-

trations for a manual on the art of perspective. The Renaissance
invested this art with far more than technical significance; for Neoplatonism in particular, the power to map, mirror, or represent the world bore witness to the spark of the divine in man. As Ficino writes, “Since man has observed the order of the heavens, when they move, whither they proceed and with what measures, and what they produce, who could deny that man possesses as it were almost the same genius as the Author of the heavens? And who could deny that man could somehow also make the heavens, could he only obtain the instruments and the heavenly material, since even now he makes them, though of a different material, but still with a very similar order.”

The terrestrial and celestial spheres, the sword and the book, the state and the church, Protestantism and Catholicism, the mind as measurer of all things and the mind as unifying force, the arts and the sciences, the power of images and the power of words—all are conjoined then in Holbein’s painting and integrated in a design as intricate as the pavement. And yet slashing across the pavement, intruding upon these complex harmonies and disrupting them, is the extraordinary anamorphic representation of the death’s-head. Viewed frontally, the skull is an unreadable blur in the center foreground of the painting: only from the proper position at the side of the painting is it suddenly revealed.

The death’s-head is most obviously a bravura display of Holbein’s virtuosity, elsewhere manifested in his rendering of the complex network of surfaces on the geometrical instruments, but it also bears a more integral relation to the composition as a whole. In a major study of the painting and its subjects, Mary F. S. Hervey observed that Dinteville’s cap is adorned by a small brooch on which is engraved a silver skull, and concluded that the ambassador must have adopted the death’s-head as his personal badge or devise. This theory is plausible, but it should not be made to suggest too ornamental a function for elements that, in one’s experience of the painting, are far more disquieting. The skull as devise is at once a gesture of self-adornment and a gesture of self-cancellation. Death may be reduced on Dinteville’s cap to a fashionable piece of jewelry, an enhancement of the self, but this reduction seems as much mocked as confirmed by the large alien presence that has intruded into this supremely civilized world of human achievement. The anamorphic death’s-head draws to itself another discordant element in the painting: the broken string of the lute, an emblematic play upon the very idea of discord. Together these suggest a subtle but powerful countercurrent to the forces of harmony, reconciliation, and confident intellectual achievements. Mental sif...
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achievement embodied elsewhere in the picture’s objects and fig-
ures. None of these antitypes is immediately visible—the or-
mental skull and broken string reveal themselves only to the
closest scrutiny, only, that is, if one abandons the large, encom-
assing view of the painting and approaches the canvas with such
myopic closeness that the whole gives way to a mass of individual
details. To see the large death’s-head requires a still more radical
abandonment of what we take to be “normal” vision; we must
throw the entire painting out of perspective in order to bring into
perspective what our usual mode of perception cannot com-
prehend.

Death’s presence in Holbein’s painting is at once more elusive
and more disturbing than the conventional representations of
death in late medieval art. In the familiar transi tombs, for ex-
ample, the putrescent, worm-eaten corpse on the bottom level may
be said to mock the figure above, dressed in robes of high office.

But the mockery affirms the viewer’s understanding of the relation
between life and death, indeed simplifies that understanding. In
this sense, the transi tombs, for all their horrible imagery, are
expressions of a certain kind of confidence: the confidence of a
clear perception of things, a willingness to contemplate the inevi-
able future of the flesh without mystification or concealment. We
can see the body both in its dignity and in its disgrace. In “The
Ambassadors,” such clear, steady sight is impossible; death is
affirmed not in its power to destroy the flesh, or as is familiar from
late medieval literature, in its power to horrify and cause unbe-
able pain, but in its uncanny inaccessibility and absence. What is
unseen or perceived as only a blur is far more disquieting than
what may be faced boldly and directly, particularly when the lim-
itations of vision are grasped as structural, the consequence more
of the nature of perception than of the timidity of the perceiver.

The anamorphic skull casts a shadow on the elegant floor—the
shadow of the shadow of death, Hervey neatly calls it—and thus
demonstrates its substantiality, but the shadow falls in a different
direction from those cast by the ambassadors or the objects on the
table. Its presence is thus at once affirmed and denied; if it can
become visible to us, when we take up the appropriate position at
the angle of the painting, it is manifestly not accessible to the
figures in the painting (in the sense that the books and in-
struments are assumed to be accessible). To be sure, Dinteville has
his silver death’s-head brooch, but we feel far more the in-
commensurability between this ornament and the skull on the
floor than their accord. And this incommensurability is confirmed
by the fact that we must distort and, in essence, efface the figures in order to see the skull. That this effacement is moving—that it is felt as a kind of death—is a function of Holbein’s mastery of those representational techniques which pay tribute to the world, that glorify the surfaces and textures of things, that celebrate man’s relatedness to the objects of his making. For there is nothing in the painting that is not the product of human fashioning—no flower, no lapdog, no distant landscape glimpsed through an open window. The heavens and the earth are present only as the objects of measurement and representation, the objects of the globemaker’s art. It is only when one takes leave of this world—quite literally takes leave by walking away from the front of the canvas—that one can see the single alien object, the skull. The skull expresses the death that the viewer has, in effect, himself brought about by changing his perspective, by withdrawing his gaze from the figures of the painting. For that gaze is, the skull implies, reality-conferring; without it, the objects so lovingly represented in their seeming substantiality vanish. To move a few feet away from the frontal contemplation of the painting is to efface everything within it, to bring death into the world.

I have spoken of the skull as alien and inhuman, but to do so is itself an ironic distortion, for it is the one object in the painting that is at once human and completely natural in the sense of being untouched by artifice. There are, to be sure, the faces and hands of Dinteville and Selve, and yet so strong is the sense of pose as Holbein depicts them that they seem, of all the objects in the painting, the most artificially crafted. They possess a calculated impenetrability that suggests, in the hands, the carefully fashioned casualness counseled by Castiglione and, in the faces, the masking counseled by Machiavelli. The skull then is virtually unique in its inaccessibility to the power of human shaping affirmed everywhere else in the painting; it is the sole occupant of a category that nonetheless counterpoises all of the other objects.

Yet paradoxically this skull, emblem of that which resists and outlasts artifice, is treated aesthetically with the most spectacular display of the painter’s ingenuity and skill, just as paradoxically the death’s-head, emblem of the negation of human achievement, is worn by Dinteville as a fashionable ornament, a badge of status akin to the Order of Saint Michael he wears around his neck. The effect of these paradoxes is to resist any clear location of reality in the painting, to question the very concept of locatable reality upon which we conventionally rely in our mappings of the world, to subordinate the sign systems we so confidently use to a larger doubt. Holbein’s world with a painting insententiality and control over the art that is the relationship of instance we come to perceive, virtual in relation to non-place is possible a site and reassum but we do (moment, the the periphery) The non-place touched the Jean de Dinteville almost hallucinates stretched content before us.

For I just grounds that simultaneous complexity of world of Dinteville before us of recall Rope Elton’s phrase his own death, "into his geometry, a worldly affair he in the night with him the stars and planets wonderful these flatten out until his co
At the Table of the Great

CHAPTER ONE

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doubt. Holbein fuses a radical questioning of the status of the
world with a radical questioning of the status of art. For the
painting insists, passionately and profoundly, on the re-
representational power of art, its central role in man’s apprehen-
and control of reality, even as it insists, with uncanny persuasive-
ness, on the fictional character of that entire so-called reality and
the art that pretends to represent it. In the context of our normal
relationship to a painting—indeed, in the context of the physical
stance we conventionally assume before any object we have chos-
end to perceive—the marginal position is an eccentric flight of
fancy, virtually a non-place, just as the skull exists in a non-place
in relation to all the other objects Holbein depicts. But to enter this
non-place is to alter everything in the painting and to render im-
possible a simple return to normal vision. Of course, we do return
and reassure that perspective that seems to “give” us the world,
but we do so in a state of estrangement. In the same artistic
moment, the moment of passage from the center of the painting to
the periphery, life is effaced by death, representation by artifice.
The non-place that is the place of the skull has reached out and
touched phenomenal reality, infecting it with its own alienation.
Jean de Din teville and Georges de Selve, so present to us in their
almost hallucinatory substantiality, are revealed to be pigments on
stretched canvas, an illusionist’s trick. They who seem to be pres-
ent before us exist nowhere, exist then in utopia.

For I justify this long discussion of “The Ambassadors” on the
ground that it plunges us, with the sensuous immediacy and
simultaneity that only a painting can achieve, into the full com-
plexity of More’s estrangement and the richness of his art. The
world of Din teville and Selve was More’s world; with the image
before us of the table laden with books and instruments, we may
recall Roper’s account of the period during which More was, in
Elton’s phrase, Henry VIII’s “pet humanist.” “When he had done
his own devotions,” Roper writes, the king would send for More
“into his traverse, and there sometime in matters of astronomy,
geometry, divinity, and such other faculties, and sometimes of his
worldly affairs, to sit and confer with him. And other while would
he in the night have him up into his leads, there for to consider
with him the diversities, courses, motions, and operations of the
stars and planets.” The conclusion of the anecdote in Roper is
wonderfully revealing: finding himself increasingly trapped by
these flattering royal attentions, More “began thereupon some-
what to dissemble his nature,” in other words, to become a bore,
until his company was no longer so much in demand. If this seems
to lead us away from Holbein’s ambassadors, presumably vying for the king’s attention, it is only because More had in supreme measure those skills of rhetoric and learning that a Dinteville would have assiduously cultivated.

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 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—analagous 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 book II. More and Hythlodaeus deal with each other, but as in different directions and not to each other.

This disquieting intro frame of the work of its reader restlessly moves text, from its largest unit, Elizabeth McCutcheon’s of the latter in a frequent use of litotes affirmed by stating that the figure, she writes, “side to a question”; momental movement, another and back again would suggest, the close technique of anamorphic back-and-forth movement.

It would obviously be to explicate in detail the litotes, we may contradictions worked out in his recent Utopique success that there are of half-hidden ruptures and consistencies and change, the exercise of uses of violence. The presence in the work of fiction, the presence of which owes its existence and the midst of Utopia’s chronic maplike—the the finished product produced. These brief, structural integrity of Marin, on which the Marin would speak of the instances he constantly questions its pretends to represent.
CHAPTER ONE

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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.

It would obviously take us too long, even were it in our power, to explicate in detail all of Utopia’s anamorphic techniques, but, beyond litotes, we may point to the network of linkages and contradictions worked out with mandarin complexity by Louis Marin in his recent Utopiques. Marin demonstrates, with at least partial success, that there are in the smooth surface of Utopian life a series of half-hidden ruptures, ruptures betrayed by subtle inconsistencies and contradictions in topography, economic exchange, the exercise of power, concepts of criminality, and the uses of violence. These ruptures, according to Marin, reveal the presence in the work of the half-effaced signs of its own production, the presence of those sociohistorical forces to which Utopia owes its existence and which it is designed to render invisible. In the midst of Utopian description—timeless, immobile, synchronic, maplike—there survive traces of narrative that mark in the finished product the hidden processes by which it was produced. These brief, fragmentary narrative enclaves destroy the structural integrity of the description, tear the canvas, writes Marin, on which the best government is depicted. But where Marin would speak of a canvas torn, I would speak, at least in most of the instances he analyzes, of a subtle anamorphic art that constantly questions its own status and the status of the world it pretends to represent. That is, Marin seems to underestimate
More's self-consciousness, a self-consciousness for once the match of its Gallic counterparts. If there exist highly significant "blind spots" in Utopia—for example, an urban design that does not seem to allow for the centralized exercise of power that the system nevertheless calls for—they exist like the great, central blind spot in Holbein's "Ambassadors": as the object of the artist's profound, playful attention.

This playfulness—so easily acknowledged and ignored—deserves special emphasis, for it occupies a central role in both the painting and the book. The arts of mapmaking, calculation, and measurement that figure so prominently in "The Ambassadors" and Utopia have important practical functions in everyday life, but they are present here as recreation, the elegant play of distinguished and serious men. This play is not conceived by humanists as an escape from the serious, but as a mode of civility, an enhancement of specifically human powers. As such, the globes and compasses, along with the lute and flutes, sit without contradiction next to the book of merchant's arithmetic, on the one hand, and the book of divine worship, on the other, just as the mock alphabet and maps of Utopia are bound up—literally and figuratively—with a searching inquiry into the sources of human misery and the possibilities of human government. The distorted skull in Holbein's painting, for all the grimness of its imagery, is itself an invitation to the viewer to play, while the reader of Utopia is invited to enter a carefully demarcated playground that possesses nonetheless a riddling relation to the world outside. That the playfulness in "The Ambassadors" focuses on a skull suggests that the anamorphic technique may derive in part at least from medieval methods of meditation, particularly the concentration upon an object—frequently the death's-head—that enables one to lose the world, to perceive the vanity of human life and the illusory quality of reality. One might argue that Holbein's painting signals the decay of such methods, a loss of intensity that can only be partially recuperated through illusionist tricks, but if so, one must conclude that this decay released a magnificent aesthetic byproduct. And while Utopia too may owe something to meditative technique, detached from its original purpose, one would be hard pressed from More's works to conclude that the technique was in decay.

In almost all his writings, More returns again and again to the unsettling of man's sense of reality, the questioning of his instruments of measurement and representation, the demonstration of blind spots. Antony clearly does not merely dare to challenge convention, or defy friends, or utter words to the effect of "None of Visions fall into a similar game once to an attraction and a dislike says, we may common fate should be a waking: ratiocinations, to terms as More implied.

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of blind spots in his field of vision. In the Dialogue of Comfort, Antony challenges Vincent to prove that he is awake and not merely dreaming that he is awake, or dreaming that he has been challenged to prove his watchfulness, or dreaming that he has responded to this challenge by moving his limbs or talking rationally, or dreaming that he is merrily describing such a dream to his friends, or dreaming that he has finally appealed beyond body and words to the unshakable conviction in his soul that he is awake. None of Vincent’s responses does anything to arrest the vertigino-
us fall into an infinite regress of self-mirroring dreams; as with
similar games played by Nicholas of Cusa, the mind is driven at
once to an acknowledgment of the conjectural status of all its op-
ations and to a profession of faith. In these arguments, Antony
says, we must appeal finally to “the Scripture of God” and “the
common faith of Christ’s Catholic Church.” This faith is not, it
should be noted, an answer to the speculations about sleep and
waking; rather it may more fairly be said to license those specu-
lations, to transform into play thoughts that might otherwise lead,
as More implies, to suicide or heresy.

We may recall at this point an object in Holbein’s painting that
until now we barely noted: the crucifix only half visible at the
extreme edge of the curtain. This sign is not impervious to
effacement—after all, it is turned into a blur, along with every-
thing else, when the skull is brought into focus—yet it may be said
to possess a certain cultic imperviousness to the corrosive effects
of anamorphosis. In this sense, the marginal presence of the
 crucifix—symbol of life redeemed from death—sanctions the
marginal presence of the skull—emblem of death lurking beneath
life. Similarly, Antony’s faith is theoretically susceptible to the
charge of being a dream, but More refuses to carry the argument that far,
for it is precisely faith that invites the speculation even as it closes
off the infinite regress. But is there any guarantee of this im-
perviousness to anamorphic subversion? Not, I think, within the
painting or the text themselves: any assurance must be imposed
from without, by an individual or by an interpretive community
with an interest in establishing a fixed point beyond the ceaseless
oscillation of irreconcilable perspectives. Holbein’s painting
seems deliberately ambiguous about the ultimate origin of this
assurance: both the Catholic Church and Lutheran faith are in-
voked, and we might note that his earlier woodcut series on the
Dance of Death was printed, within the space of a few years, by
both Catholic and Protestant printers in Lyons. More’s Dialogue
of Comfort, by contrast, is not at all ambiguous: Antony’s assurance rests not upon the feeling faith of the individual, but upon the power exercised jointly by the sacred text and by the institution that controls interpretation of that text. The daring of Utopia is to be gauged by the extreme marginality of the Scripture of God and the common faith of Christ’s Catholic Church: in defense of Utopian principles, Hythlodeus several times invokes the “doctrine” and “authority” of Christ, but the institutional implications of this authority are unspoken. Like Holbein, More had partially pulled the curtain in front of the crucifix.27

What unites Utopia—enigmatic in its relation to the ultimate authority of the Church—and the Dialogue of Comfort—unambiguously committed to that authority—is More’s lifelong interest in the ironies that arise from man’s confident belief in illusions. The dreamer who insists that he is awake is only one of a network of such ironies that we may trace all the way back to the pageant verses More composed in his youth. “Old and young, man and woman, rich and poor, prince and page,” he writes characteristically in the unfinished Four Last Things (1522), “all the while we live in this world, we be but prisoners, and within a sure prison, out of which there can no man escape,” but few of us have ever glimpsed the walls, and we strut about as though we were free. Or again, “all our whole life is but a sickness never curable, but as one uncurable canker, with continual swaddling and plastering, botched up to live as long as we may, and in conclusion undoubtfully to die of the same sickness, and though there never came other”—but few of us understand our condition, and we strut about as though we were in health.

We find the same vision expressed in almost the same words in More’s early epigrams and again, near the end of his life, in the Dialogue of Comfort: they clearly represent a sustained and repeated impulse toward the unsettling of reality. And in their deep disillusionment, they are the foundation of his famous humor whose most characteristic mode is the portrayal of men entangled in their own fantasies:

If ye shouldest perceive that one were earnestly proud of the wearing of a gay golden gown, while the losel playeth the lord in a stage play, woudest ye not laugh at his folly, considering that ye are very sure, that when the play is done, he shall go walk a knife in his old coat? Now ye thinkest thy self wise enough while ye art proud in thy players garment, and forgettest that when thy play is done, ye shalt go forth as poor as he. Nor ye remember done as so...
is not at all ambiguous: Antony's assurance of his faith in the individual, but upon the sacred text and by the institutionalization of that text. The daring of Utopia is extreme marginality of the Scripture of God of Christ's Catholic Church: in defense of Holbein several times invokes the "doctrines of Christ, but the institutional implications are spoken. Like Holbein, More had partially of the crucifix. 27

Enigmatic in its relation to the ultimate end-of-the-Discourse—of the Dialogue of Comfort—of More's lifelong commitment to the sovereignty of which insists that he is awake is only one of a series of words that may trace all the way back to the beginning of his youth. "Old and young, rich and poor, prince and page," he writes in unfinished Four Last Things (1522), "all the world, we but prisoners, and within a surer life can no man escape," but few of us have escaped. And we strut about as though we were healthy, but a sickness never curable, a sickness, with continual swaddling and palse as long as we may, and in conclusion the same sickness, and though there never was a time of us understand our condition, and we were in health.

One expressed in almost the same words in his essay. And again, near the end of his life, in the final years, clearly represent a sustained and relentless unsettling of reality. And in their deep are the foundation of his famous humoristic mode is the portrayal of men entangled

At the Table of the Great

rememberest not that thy pageant may happen to be done as soon as his. 29

The theatrical metaphor was More's favorite, and for good reason: it is the point in which the disparate and seemingly discontinuous aspects of his existence come together, touch, and resonate. For the stage as emblem of human existence combines, as it were, the competing perspectives of Holbein's painting: the theater pays tribute to a world that it loves—or at least that it cannot live without—even as it exposes that world as a fiction. More uses theatrical imagery to depict a world living out rituals in which it has ceased fully to believe, to display the folly of human pretensions, to evoke the great leveling power of Death, who strips the king of his rich robes and reduces him at last to the same state as the poorest beggar. The metaphor has a leveling effect even without the invocation of death, for to conceive of kingship as a dramatic part, an expensive costume and some well-rehearsed lines, is potentially at least to demystify it, to reduce its sacred symbolism to tinsel. The dangerous implications of this demystification can be seen quite clearly in More's epigram "On the King and the Peasant." A forest-bred peasant comes to town and sees a royal procession. When the crowd roars out "Long live the king!" and with rapt expressions gazes up at the ruler, the peasant calls out, "Where is the king? Where is the king?"

And one of the bystanders replied, "There he is, the one mounted high on that horse over there." The peasant said, "Is that the king? I think you are fooling me. He seems to me to be a man in an embroidered garment." 30

From here it is only one step to the revolutionary outrage of John Ball or at the least to the bitter anger of More's own fictional character, Raphael Hythlodeus, inveighing against the conspiracy of the rich. But far more often in More's works the theatrical metaphor turns inward, expressing his tragicomic perception of life lived at a perpetual remove from reality. All men are caught up in receding layers of fantasy: the spectator laughs or is angry to see another pride himself on a mere fiction, while he himself is no less a player, no less entangled in fantasy. More's sense of human absurdity then at once leads him to social criticism and undermines that criticism, enabling him to ridicule the ideology of the powerful but severely limiting the practical consequences of that ridicule. Revolution, as Marx understood, can have no traffic with inner intimations of unreality.