

THE FIRST FRENCH AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF SIR THOMAS MORE'S 'UTOPIA'

AN investigation of the editions of the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More is an exciting subject in itself, but a comparison of the first French and English translations throws remarkable light upon the parallel developments of the two countries in Renaissance literary history. In many respects, the two works may be regarded as vaguely symbolic of the general tendencies of the period, so that even the most casual 'explication de texte' verifies whatever observations one has already been able to make in a comparative study of sixteenth-century literature on the Continent and in England.

In the first place, the history of the *Utopia* begins outside of England, although an Englishman was the author. Thomas More first planned the work as early as 1510 during a diplomatic visit to Antwerp, where he had met Peter Giles, an associate of Erasmus. And it was to his friends on the Continent that More turned when the work was ready for the press. Of the early Latin editions of the *Utopia*, none were published in England until past the middle of the seventeenth century,¹ and by this time there had been more than a dozen editions on the Continent, including Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. *Editio princeps* of the *Utopia* was printed by Thierry Martin at Louvain, near the end of 1516. This was hastily followed by an edition at Paris in 1517 by Gilles de Gourmont, and a corrected edition at Basle in 1518. Modern scholars have not so far rediscovered a fourth edition at Venice in 1519 by the Juntine Press, nor a fifth at Basle in 1520, although More's contemporaries seem to imply that they knew at least of the existence of these volumes.

However that may be, three to five editions of the *Utopia* during the lifetime of Thomas More (who was executed in 1535) indicate the popularity of the work from the earliest times in scholarly circles. Yet it was not until 1548 that we hear of a translation into a vulgar tongue, and this was not into More's native language but rather into Italian. Two years later the first French translation appeared, and the following year the *Utopia* was translated into English for the first time. Nearly a half century had passed, then, before the work was available in English. Here, as in many other aspects of sixteenth-century literary history, England lagged behind the Continent on the one hand, and on the other threatened to rival her sister cultures in spite of her tardiness. The first English

¹ Oxford, 1663.

translation of the *Utopia* is another example of England's 'belated precocity' in the sixteenth century. At a superficial glance, one can see nothing but its faults. It is only when we examine the two texts more closely that we begin to realize that the defects of the English version can in the end recede into the background through contrast.

There is no reason to believe, by the way, that the English translator made use of the French text. As will be shown below, there are no similarities in phraseology for one thing. Errors are made by Ralphe Robynson which might have been corrected had he consulted the interpretation of Jehan Le Blond. - But chronologically a comparison of texts would have been impossible. The French work appeared in 1550, and the English in 1551. The English translation must already have been in manuscript by 1550, inasmuch as the preface tells us how a friend of the translator urged him to publish the work which he had originally prepared only for an intimate circle. It is possible that knowledge of the fact that a French translation had appeared urged the English circle around Robynson to rush his work to the press. But even this kind of explanation is only vague speculation.

The French edition of Jehan Le Blond was apparently prepared with a great deal of care. On the title-page, which is arranged with the utmost consideration for bibliophiles, we read:

La description de l'isle d'utopie ou est comprins le miroer des republicques du monde, et l'exemplaire de vie heureuse: redigé par escript en stille Treselegant de grand' haultesse et maiesté par illustre bon et sçavant personnage Thomas Morus citoyen de Londre et chancelier d'Angleterre. Avec l'Espistre liminaire composee par Monsieur Budé maistre des requestes du feu Roy Francoys premier de ce nom.

Below this is a little decoration containing the words, 'avec privilege', and beneath appears the printer's name and date of publication:

Les semblables sont à vendre au Palais à Paris au premier pillier de la grand' Salle en la Bouticque de Charles l'Angelier devant la Chappelle de Messieurs les Presidents. 1550.

On the back of the title-page is a letter signed Du Tillet and dated 1549, granting to the printer exclusive sale for the following three years. Then follows a French translation of a letter of Guillaume Budé to Thomas Lupset, English Humanist and friend of More and Erasmus, which had first appeared in the Latin edition of 1517. Then the translator offers some verses of his own composition—'dixain du translateur à la louenge de la saincte vie des Utopiens'—and on the next 'feuille' (which is the first numbered leaf) is contained a summary of the First Book of the *Utopia*:

Les excellentz propos que tient en Flandres un singulier homme nommé Raphael Hytlodeus, Portugalloys, touchant le bon regime de la republicque: Ensemble le

recit qu'il fit des meurs, Loix, Coustumes & Pollice, Bien ordonnée des habitans d'Utopie, nouvelle Isle, n'a pas long temps trouvée et découverte: Aussi de la description d'icelle: de laquelle n'avoit faict iamais mention aulcun Geographe au paravant. Le tout redigé par escript en stille tres elegant de grand haultesse et maiesté. Par illustre bon et sçavant personnage Thomas Morus Citoyen de Londres & Chancelier d'Angleterre. Traduict en langue Francoyse par Maistre Iehan le Blond d'Eureux.

An excellent woodcut at the top of 'feuillet one' shows Hythlodæus talking to More, Giles, and Clement, all dressed like characters from antiquity. On 'feuillet two' is a woodcut of Thomas More in his study, and on the same page the actual narrative begins. There are one hundred and five 'feuillets' for the *Utopia* itself, and the introductory and concluding remarks are collected on unnumbered leaves.

This little octavo volume is a very satisfactory job of printing. Woodcuts appear at the head of each chapter in Book Two, as well as at the head of two letters to the reader from the translator at the end of the narrative. There are twelve woodcuts in all, even though the scene of Thomas More in his study is repeated three times. After the two letters from the translator comes a very complete index of the chapters in the *Utopia*—'S'ensuit la table des chapitres du premier & second livre de la description de l'Isle d'Utopie'—covering nine pages. On the last 'feuillet' is a table of errata—'fautes survenues à l'impression'—listing twenty-five errors. On the reverse side is the printer's coat of arms, which is extremely decorative.

Turning to the English edition of 1551, we find an octavo volume of similar size, but far less impressive to the collector. A nineteenth-century critic has commented: 'This first English edition is neatly printed with a handsome margin....All our lexicographers have omitted to notice it, although it is one of the best specimens extant of our language at the period when it was written.'¹ The statement is quite true, and yet when we compare the English work with the French, the former appears crass and ugly. While the 1550 edition is printed in Roman type, and contains on the whole very few serious errors, the 1551 edition is printed in heavy black medieval letters. Words are run together as often as they are separated, and the capricious spelling of sixteenth-century English adds greater confusion to what is already confusing enough. The edition contains no woodcuts whatsoever, and the decorations seem very cheap and ineffective when we compare them to the coquettish ornaments of the capital letters in the French text, or even in one of the earliest Latin editions. The 'U' in 'upon' of the pre-

¹ T. F. Dibdin, *More's Utopia*, London, 1808, I, clxiii.

fatory epistle is almost childish in contrast to the elaborate 'C' of 'certes' in Budé's epistle. The English edition contains no marginal notes, which had been very copious in the French edition and had appeared in Latin editions from the very beginning. There is no index, no list of errata, and no numbering of pages. Paragraphing is completely ignored, whereas the French edition not only divided the text into paragraphs but also made use of the printer's symbol at each indentation. In the English text, words are so close together that at times one sentence can hardly be separated from another. The period appears for the most part in the middle of a line, and there is often no space left between the last word of one sentence and the first word of the next.

The French had undoubtedly been trying to produce an 'elegant' text: in fact, the words 'très élégant' twice appeared in the passages quoted above. Thomas More himself was mentioned as 'illustre, bon, et sçavant', and the translation, in form as well as in content, seemed to be modelled on this idea. But the English translation, even on its title-page, is characterized by straightforward Anglo-Saxon frankness, without much care for good taste:

A fruteful and pleasaunt worke of the beste state of a publyque weale, and of the newe yle called Utopia: written in Latin by Sir Thomas More knyght, and translated into Englyshe by Raphe Robynson Citizein and Goldsmythe of London, at the procurement and earnest request of George Tadolwe Citizein and Haberdassher of the same Citie.

Imprinted at London by Abraham Vele, dwelling in Paulschurcheyarde at the sygne of the Lambe.

The contrast between the two titles is apparent at once. It is not at all surprising to discover that Robynson produces a much sloppier translation than does Le Blond. When, for example, Robynson confuses 'educti' with 'educati' and translates it as 'brought up', we are gratified to find in Le Blond 'on les y mainne'.

Following the title-page appears a letter from the translator to William Cecil, and after this a letter from Thomas More to Peter Giles, which had appeared in all Latin editions of the work. Then follows the text, monotonously compact in form to the end, with nothing else at the conclusion except a repetition of the printer's name and date of publication.

That the English themselves recognized the inadequacies of their version is indisputable, inasmuch as a second edition appeared in 1556: 'newlie perused and corrected and also with divers notes in the margent augmented'. This time the translator is distinguished as 'sometime fellowe of Corpus Christi College in Oxford' instead of as 'citizen and goldsmith', and the folios have been numbered. On the other hand, the

print is not much better, although it is larger, and the paragraphs are still unseparated. No pictures appear, neither in this nor in the third edition of 1597 (printed by Thomas Creede), although they had never been absent from Latin editions. Indeed, as far as format is concerned, none of the three English editions of the *Utopia* in the sixteenth century can be considered serious rivals of the single French translation of 1550.

A comparison of the spelling in the French and English editions gives even greater credit to the French. The 1550 edition contains errors, it is true, even apart from those listed in the errata, particularly in word division, where, for example, 'si dieu eust voulu' becomes two words instead of four. Hesitation between medieval and Renaissance spelling is apparent as well: 'mœurs' keeps its old form 'meurs', 'savant' is written with the sixteenth-century 'ç' after the 's', and 'personnage' may or may not have an 'i' after the 'a'. But the English text disports itself with a kind of capriciousness that is almost incredible. It becomes difficult to understand how Robynson and his contemporaries could speak seriously of 'corrections' in the successive editions when almost any spelling seemed to be acceptable. To find 'Amerike' and 'Amerycke' or 'lytle' and 'lytyll' on the same page are not in the least disturbing after one has witnessed such a phrase as 'their groundes, there ryvers, their cities, their people, their manners, their ordenauness, ther laws', a sentence, by the way, which was not 'corrected' in later editions. It would seem that orthography, just like printing, modelled itself upon the English disregard for the order and rule which were fashionable on the Continent.

The French sense of correctness can be observed not only in the care with which the printers prepared their editions, but also in the respect which was shown for the original text. Jehan Le Blond, in his two letters to the reader mentioned above, humbly apologized for any inaccuracies of translation which might be criticized by the fastidious. 'Je lay faict pour rendre les sentences de lauteur plus intelligibles', he writes, and then adds, as further justification for his liberties, that a language is enriched through the possible introduction of new words, without which we will write like 'tabellions & notaires, qui en leurs actes ne changent ne ne muent de stille'.

Ralphe Robynson, on the other hand, admits in his epistle to William Cecil, to whom his translation is dedicated, that More's Latin style was 'eloquent. . .pleasaunt and delectable' and eventually apologizes for his own deficiencies. At the same time he gives evidence of treating Thomas

More rather patronizingly. After a shower of praise upon him in one sentence, Robynson retracts slightly, and observes,

This only I saye: that it is much to be lamented of al, and not only of us English men, that a man of so incomparable witte, of so profounde knowledge, of so absolute learning, and of so fine eloquence was yet neverthelesse so much blinded, rather with obstinacie then with ignoraunce that he could not or rather would not see the shining light of godes holy truthe in certain principal pointes of Christian religion: but did rather cheuse to perseuer, and continue in his wilfull and stubborne obstinacie even to the very death.

Such a statement has no direct bearing upon the *Utopia*, and yet it is a far cry from the 'illustre, bon, et sçavant' of Le Blond, who was not concerned with passing judgement upon Thomas More, the man. It is significant, perhaps, that Robynson does not apologize for inaccuracies of renderings, but rather for his lack of skill in writing English:

Nowe I feare greatly that in this my simple translation through my rudenes and ignoraunce in our Englishe tonge all the grace and pleasure of the eloquence, wherwith the matter in Latine is finely set forth may seme to be utterly excluded, and lost.

In other words, Robynson does not question the capabilities of his native tongue, as did Le Blond, or even imply that anything could be desired for its improvement. Rather he regrets that he himself does not know it adequately. It may be noted that in the preface to the second edition of his translation Robynson does not mention More at all. Instead, he concerns himself entirely with his own style, and finally ends by suggesting, with a kind of modesty that seems a trifle threadbare:

though this worke came not from me so fine, so perfecte, and so exact at the first, as surely for my smale lerning it should have done, yf I had then ment the publishing therof in print: yet I trust I have now in this seconde edition taken about it such paines, that verye fewe great faultes and notable errors are in it to be founde.

The tone of these letters dominates in the translations produced. The Frenchman composes a dignified, aristocratic, and refined work, as faithful to the original text as the language will allow. The Englishman, on the contrary, takes all sorts of liberties, leaves out lines on occasion, inserts a few more, and sometimes rearranges an entire sentence to suit himself. Interpolations such as 'God wote' or 'Naye by saynte Marie' are thrown into the Robynson text at the slightest provocation, whereas Le Blond is always restrained and literal. A phrase such as 'horrida atque inculta omnia' becomes, in the version of Le Blond, 'de choses tristes, horribles, sans culture & ordre'. Except for the word 'ordre' (which most of us have come to regard as typically French in any case), the translation would satisfy a meticulous Latin professor. Robynson makes of the same phrase, 'all thynges oute of fasshyon and comylynes', which translates the idea but certainly not the words.

Or again, we may choose a Latin sentence such as the following: 'Bona verba, inquit Petrus, mihi visum est non ut servias regibus, sed ut inservias.' Le Blond translates: 'Voyla de beaux mots (dit Pierre). Certes mon propos n'est pas que tu les serves, ains que tu leur aydes & donnes confort.' But Robynson: 'Nay, god forbedde (quod peter), it is not my mynd that you shoulde be in bondage to kynges, but as a retaynoure to them at youre pleasure.'

In other words, the English sentence is consciously modelled on the Latin, but at the same time kept 'English'. One might say that Le Blond translates and Robynson 'Englishes'. The effect of such thoroughly English sentences, plodding along with all the flourishes of Latin rhetoric, gives a curious impression of verbosity to the English work. A German critic,¹ who has made a study of Robynson's style, analyses these repetitions and tautologies, and suggests that to a sixteenth-century reader this redundancy was undoubtedly regarded as an asset rather than as a liability. Certainly one feels to-day that this kind of Proustian complexity in Robynson's sentence structure was forced for effect, simply because the author liked it, and not because the original demanded it. That which might have made two paragraphs in French would most likely be prolonged into a clumsy and involved sentence in English. For example, such a passage from Le Blond as:

...mais combien la chose est dommageable & pernitieuse, de nourrir telles bestes, France la bien apprins à ses despens.

Les exemples des Rommains, Carthaginois & Siriens & de plusieurs aultres nations....

became in the English version:

...but howe pernycyous and pestylente a thyng it is to maynteyne such beastes, the Frenche men by there owne harmes have learned, and the examples of the Romaines, Carthaginiens, Siriens, and of many other contreys....

The two ways in which the translators dealt with a word that was difficult to decipher in the Latin text can be used to exemplify the vices and the virtues of both. Early in Book One occurs a passage which reads: 'Curavit enim atque adeo extorsit ab Americo, ut ipse in his XXIII esset, qui ad fines postremae navigationis in castello relinquabantur.' In the texts which Le Blond and Robynson consulted, 'castello' was written with a capital letter and was taken by both of them to be the name of a city. Le Blond apparently believed 'Castello' to be a misprint for 'Castille' and accordingly made the substitution. In Robynson's text, however, we find: 'For he made suche meanes and shyfte, what

¹ Gustav Gaertner, *Zur Sprache von Ralph Robynsons Übersetzung von Thomas Mores Utopia*, Rostock, 1904.

by intreataunce and what by importune sute, that he gotte lycence of mayster Amerycke (thoughe it were sore agaynst his will) to be one of the XXIII whyche in the ende of the last voyage were lefte in the contrye of Gulike.' The very redundancy of the sentence is noteworthy, but 'the contrye of Gulike' adds a touch that challenges our imagination. Dr Lupton, the first scholar to re-edit the 1516 edition of the *Utopia*, suggests that Robynson may have looked up 'Castellum' in one of the old dictionaries and found that it was the Latin name for *Jülich*, the French *Jubiers*, sometimes spelled *Gulike*, a town twenty-three miles west of Cologne.¹

One is tempted to say that the interpretation of this passage shows the Anglo-Saxon imagination at work, just as the somewhat baroque prose begotten of simple Latin constructions betrays a similarly proud creativeness and conscious disregard for the original text. While the French translator is devoted to elegance and correctness, the English translator sacrifices accuracy for ingenuity. And the ingenuity of Ralphe Robynson's *Utopia* is the key to its lasting success. With all its faults, the 1551 translation is much more vibrant and scintillating than that of 1550.

It is generally agreed that sixteenth-century literature remained on the whole aristocratic and aloof in France. The *Utopia* of Jehan Le Blond is certainly no exception. It is a work of ultra-refinement, designed to suit the precious tastes of the cultured nobility. The *Utopia* of Ralphe Robynson, on the contrary, is a popular work, bringing the scholarly Latin of Thomas More within the reach of lesser educated bourgeois. The words 'citizen', 'goldsmith', 'knight', and 'haberdasher' on the title-page are addressed, we may say, to the sixteenth-century equivalent of our twentieth-century middle class, and the translation supports the rather unkind statement which has become proverbial on the Continent that England is a land of merchants and shopkeepers. For Robynson certainly impresses the reader with his 'popular' English. The translation is full of the very picturesque and forceful language which was later to find its place in the drama, and which would have no place at all in the accepted literature of France for the next two centuries. It was Le Blond who apologized for any possible vulgarisms in his work, but he was far too elegant to write any. It was Ralphe Robynson who produced them quite naturally, and excused himself, as it were, for not producing more.

What could be more proper, after all, for 'Si consiliariis cum rege quopiam tractantibus...' than 'S'il advient que les conseillers de quel-

¹ Cf. J. Churton Collins, *More's Utopia*, p. 149.

que roy conferent ensemble...'? It is polished and correct in every sense of the word. But Robynson makes the phrase as English and as colloquial as anything Sir John Falstaff ever said: 'Suppose that some kyng and his counsell were together whettinge their wittes...'

The same characteristics can be noted in countless other passages. For example, in the Latin text we read:

Si ostenderem omnes hos conatus bellorum, quibus tot nationes eius causa tumultuarentur, quum thesauros eius exhauissent, ac destruxissent populum....

This becomes in the French,

Si je remonstroys toutes les entreprises des guerres, pour lesquelles tant de nations estoient en différent à cause de ce roy, tant de thresors evacuez, son pauvre peuple destruiet....

But the English announces with a gorgeous flourish,

If I should declare unto them, that all this busy preparance to warre, whereby so many nations for hys sake shuld be brought into a troublesome hurley-burley when all hys coffers were emtied, his treasures wasted and his people destroyed....

'A troublesome hurley-burley', it must be admitted, has an entirely different effect from 'estoient en différent', or, for that matter, from 'tumultuarentur'.

Conversationally, Robynson is at his best. A stilted Latin sentence, translated into French as a kind of dialogue at court, is full of contemporaneous vitality when transformed into English.

Hanc orationem quibus auribus, mi More, putas excipiendam? Profecto non valde pronis inquam,

has a distinctly medieval quality in the original.

Escouterà lon voluntiers ce mien propos à ton advis, mon amy Morus, queres ne presteront l'Oreille à ta harengue, disie,

is excellent Renaissance French. But there is an even greater Renaissance English flavour in,

Thys myne advyse, maister More, how thynke yow it would be harde and taken? So God helpe me not very thankfully (quod I).

An even longer passage may show how limited and restricted the literalness of the French eventually became. While Robynson looked for English equivalents for Latin ideas, and had no scruples against transforming the English itself, Le Blond sacrificed vigour for correctness. Le Blond, in fact, strikes one to-day as a sixteenth-century Victorian, Robynson as a typical Elizabethan. Nowhere does this criticism seem more valid than in the following passages. More writes:

Nam et ministris nobilium, et opificibus, et ipsis propemodum rusticis, et omnibus denique ordinibus, multum est insolentis apparatus in vestibus, nimius in victu luxus. Iam ganea, lustra, lupanar, et aliud lupanar, tabernae vinariae, ceruisiariae, postremo

tot improbi ludi, alea, charta, fritillus, pila, sphaera, discus, annon haec celeriter exhausta pecunia recta suos mystas mittunt aliquo latrocinatum?

The French translation advances somewhat hesitatingly upon an unpleasant subject, and retreats diplomatically by suggesting rather than stating:

Les serviteurs des gentizhommes, gens de mestier & rustiques quasi, & tous estatz sont superfluz en habitz & en boire & menger.

Davantaige on tolere bordeaux, tavernes ou on vend vin & cervoise, puis tant de jeux nuisibles, comme jeux hasardeux, les cartes, le tablier, paulme, la bille, et aultres semblables.

The English translation, however, strives for an effect, which it creates with startling success because of its excellent choice of synonyms:

For not only gently mens servauntes, but also handy craft men: yea and almoste the ploughe men of the countrey, with all other sortes of people, use muche straunge and prowde newe fangleness in their apparrell, and to muche prodigal riotte and sumptuous fare at their table. Nowe bawdes, qweynes, hoores, harlottes, strumpettes, brothelhouses, stewes, and yet an other stewes, wine tavernes, ale houses, and tipling houses, with so many noughty lewde and unlawfull games, as dice, cards, tables, tennys, volles, coytes, do not all thys sende the haunTERS of them streyght a stealyng when theyr money is gone.

In short, the English rendition is a masterpiece of imagination, elaboration, and imagery. A simple Latin expression is expanded, contracted, and twisted, repetition follows upon repetition, adjectives are strung together, and nouns are modified by the piling up of equivalents. What the English translation loses in accuracy and elegance it gains in its inventiveness and its verbal experiments. Whether it was the fact that the appearance of the Book of Common Prayer two years previously had offered new possibilities for expression, or whether the French tendencies towards what was later to develop into seventeenth-century neo-classicism barred stylistic adventurousness will probably never be completely determined. Perhaps both factors played a part. Certainly, the English translation became a notable contribution to sixteenth-century prose, whereas the French work passed away into the annals of antiquarians as 'the first French translation of the *Utopia*'. Only with difficulty can the naïve student even discover the translator's name to-day in a non-French country, while Ralphe Robynson is mentioned in every history of English literature.

A recent French critic has remarked, with some degree of exasperation:

Pour les éditeurs anglais, tout se passe comme si l'*Utopie* latine était une annexe de la vieille traduction de Ralph Robynson, lequel est un peu leur Amyot. Mais Amyot ne doit faire oublier Plutarque.¹

¹ Marie Delcourt, preface to her edition of the Latin text of the *Utopia*.

Mlle Delcourt is correct. Robynson must not make us forget Thomas More. But it is also true that Thomas More must not let us forget Ralph Robynson. His translation may not be 'great' literature—indeed, there is a tendency among English critics to over-rate its excellence—but it is memorable, and undoubtedly deserves the consideration it has received. The French, since the sixteenth century, have let each new generation retranslate More for them. The English, on the other hand, prefer to add longer and more explanatory footnotes to the translation of 1551, and none of Robynson's successors has ever been able to supplant him.

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