Along with the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, the year 2016 saw the 500th anniversary of Thomas More’s Utopia. These two prominent figures of English Renaissance mark its very limits: the former, the upper; the latter, the lower. Thomas More who opens the era created a text whose historical influence upon both literature and humanities is not to be underestimated. It may be argued that any theory or practice of social utopia that emerged between 16th and 20th centuries is ultimately derived from Thomas More. 

Utopia created a paradigm for a new literary genre and a new way of thinking about the future – that is, speculative fiction. A common understanding of ‘utopia’, sometimes shared by academic tradition, as of ‘fantasy’, ‘an utterly unrealistic project’ [Kateb 1972], is seemingly directly linked to the primary meaning of the word: *u-topos* ‘no-place’. This understanding narrows down the meaning of utopia to a ‘fictitious world’. However, there have been more complex views. Utopia has been understood as a literary genre [Trousson 1995; Sargent 1979], as a function [Guldberg Cerutty, 1996; Roig, 1992], as a general principle of being [Ainsa 1999], as a false ethical value dangerous for the humanity [Popper 1945], as a sort of humanistic religion or secularized eschatology [Buber 1966] or as a scientific method of thinking [Krismanovsky 1963; Ruyer 1950]. Some, such as Ruyer, have focused upon the instrumental role of fictionality which is seen as a kind of thought experiment.

In the present article, we seek to clarify the relationship between fact and fiction in Utopia by putting it into its specific historical and socio-cultural context, which is, in our opinion, the only evidence-based method to establish how much fiction is actually there and what is its task in the text.

1. The Earliest Editions of Utopia: a Brief Review

*Utopia*, or, more accurately, *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*, was first published in 1516 in Leuven, followed by the 1517 Paris edition and two Basel editions (both in 1518), all in Latin. After that More ceased to control the further publications. There are some differences between the first four editions. In his letter to Erasmus, written in September 1516, More showed enthusiasm for publication and asked for promotion from humanistic circles. Erasmus was eager to help, and the text of *Utopia* received multiple recommendatory additions known as *parerga*. These include: letters from various Christian humanists; poems praising Utopia; the Utopian alphabet; a poem in Utopian with a Latin translation etc. All four editions have an introductory letter from More to Pieter Gillis. The first and the second also contain commentary.

However, the composition of *parerga* somewhat varies between editions: thus, the map of Utopia and the Utopian alphabet are absent from the second edition, but there is another letter to Gillis, not present in the rest three editions. The two 1518 editions are supplied with a series of epigrams by More and Erasmus. The fourth, being likely the final one [Galimidi 2006], includes the following texts:

- greetings from Erasmus to Johann Froben;
- greetings from Guillaume Budé to Thomas Lupset;
- the Utopian alphabet;
- a poem about Utopia, allegedly by a certain Anemolius, great-nephew of Hythlodaeus;
- map of Utopia;
- a poem in Utopian;

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1. This is an extended abstract. The full-length feature article is forthcoming in Russian, in the open-access journal *Knowledge. Understanding. Skill*.
• greetings from Pieter Gillis to Hieronymus van Busleyden;
• greetings from Johann Paludan to Pieter Gillis;
• a poem about Utopia, by Johann Paludan;
• Gerhard Geldenhauer, a.k.a. Gerardus Noviomagus, on Utopia;
• Cornelis Grapheus, to the reader;
• greetings from Hieronymus van Busleyden to Thomas More;
• greetings from Pieter Gillis to Thomas More;
• the first book of *Utopia* (‘The Best State of the Commonwealth, A Discourse by the Extraordinary Raphael Hythlodaeus.’);
• the second book (‘Discourse on Utopia’);
• the colophon of Froben’s.

The title page for this edition is designed by none other than Hans Holbein the Younger (1494-1543).

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**2. Historical and Fictional Characters in *Utopia***

The most doubtless facts are More’s 1515 trip to Antwerp where he had been on a diplomatic mission (it is in Antwerp that he wrote most of *Utopia*) and his friendship with both Pieter Gilles and Erasmus. Their personal and literary relationships are well-studied. A very flesh-and-blood personage is John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was Lord Chancellor under Henry VII and former master of More’s (it was he who sent the young More to the University of Oxford).

Another historical figure taking part in the discourse is John Clement, More’s assistant as of 1515, who later became a prominent physician.

It has been speculated that ‘one devout and godly man, who is exceeding desirous to go unto Utopia <...> to the intent that he may further and increase our religion which is there already begun’ may have been also a real person, either John Mayor (Mair), Doctor in Theology at the University of Paris between 1505 and 1530, or Cowland Philips, a renowned preacher [Borges Morán 1995: 96]

Above all, historical is Amerigo Vespucci (1451-1512). Since none of his letters documenting his voyages to the New World names the members of his crew, More’s imagination could easily
place Hythlodaeus among them. Other fictional characters, including Hythlodaeus himself, are given quite palpable air of veracity, which made some researchers suggest that Hythlodaeus was also based upon some real-life person.

3. The Structure of *Utopia* and Pragmatics of Its Parts

As noticed above, the two books of *Utopia* are framed with a range of secondary texts which J.L. Galimidi classified as *parerga*. This group opens with More’s epistle to Gillis, present in all four of the early editions. This text is clearly somewhat disturbing for the audience, failing to fulfil the expectations of a commentary more veracious than the text itself. It is definitely stage-like enactment: thus, More claims that Europe was deeply impressed by Hythlodaeus’ story, even despite the fact that the story is just being published for the first time.

Other ‘documents’ comprising the *parerga* support the tone set by the letter, going on with the interplay between fiction and reality. Many humanists who sign their ‘letters’ by their actual names, with realistically-sounding dates and places, praise both the real Thomas More and the imaginary state of Utopia, *as if it were real*. Gillis ‘recalls’ some more details of the Amsterdam conversation and supplies his letter with a stanza in ‘Utopian language’, allegedly received from Hythlodaeus. Fiction is supported by other fiction (thus, Hythlodaeus gets a great-nephew Anemolius, apparently named after the Anemolians, another fictional nation in *Utopia*).

Thus, although all the authors of *parerga* are seemingly placed outside the text, they are becoming involved in the story as characters, and, by equating the fictional Hythlodaeus / his relatives/ Utopia with the real More / his relatives/ England, they make any judgment on the veracity of the story even more problematic, sharing the author’s responsibility for what is spoken.

Basically, More’s method of unfolding the composition is moving from a polyphony of multiple speakers to the monologue of the main character, that is, Hythlodaeus, and from a critique of European society to a model of an ideal one.

The conversation between More, Gillis and Hythlodaeus is tripartite. In the first part Hythlodaeus recalls his visit to Cardinal Morton with whom he disputed on social and economic inequity in England. As an alternative model, he mentions ‘the Polylerits, who are a considerable and well-governed people: they pay a yearly tribute to the King of Persia, but in all other respects they are a free nation’. Introducing a clearly non-existent people into a supposedly realistic narrative is the beginning of the interplay between fact and fiction.

The second part concerns the practical applicability of Hythlodaeus’ experience and his reluctance to use it in any state office. Finally, the third subplot, further developed in Book 2, is a detailed description of geographical, political, economic and other characteristics of Utopia, allegedly visited by Hythlodaeus five years before. This is the central part of the book, and the previous discussion of contemporary European society is intended to highlight the perfection of Utopia’s.

Superficially, the story of Book 2 is a typical fanciful travel narrative not unlike those of late antiquity. However, a closer look challenges this perception. On the one hand, in both books More cared to make it clear (even to the reader with little knowledge of geography) that Hythlodaeus himself and his relations on faraway lands are pure invention of the author. Names of various locations and actors apparently hint at fictionality (city Amaurot is a “foggy”, the river Anider – “anhydrous”, Hythlodaeus – “versed in the nonsense”, etc.). On the other hand, fictionality is densely – and mysteriously – intertwined with real-life persons, places and events whose historicity can be easily checked (e.g. the fictional Hythlodaeus contacting the real Morton, Vespucci and Gillis).

This ambivalence cannot but influence upon the reader’s perception of ethical judgments pronounced in *Utopia*. The subjects tackled in the book are quite serious, such as the best state of a commonwealth, the role of religious and moral principles in state policy etc. Yet the fact that one of the participants is a fictional character makes the other side somewhat of a literary character too, no matter how eagerly he is posing as the real author. At that point, the reading of *Utopia* is brought
into an immediate connection with the question who of the book’s characters represents the author’s voice most adequately and what, after all, was the reason for writing it. наиболее выражает философскую позицию ее автора и что же в конечном счете послужило поводом к ее написанию.

**History and Fantasy in Descriptions of the New World**

Scholars have conjectured that More may have been inspired by the discoveries in the New World [Imaz 1982: 13; Abellan 1986: 391; Ramos 1981-1982]. Some claim finding evidence that *Utopia* is not fiction but a relation of a travel to Peru [Morgan 1946].

However, it must be clarified that, by the moment when *Utopia* was written, the advanced civilizations of the New World, such as the Aztecs, had not become known in Europe yet and could not serve a model for a perfect state. On the contrary, it was the literary heritage of classical antiquity, widely read in the Renaissance era, that offered such models – such as Plato’s (references to him are abundant in *Utopia*).

The possible sources of More’s knowledge about the New World may have been:

1. The letter by Columbus, published in Antwerp in 1493 [Colón 1930];
2. *Cosmographiae introductio cum quibusdam geometricae ac astronomicae principiis ad eam rem necessaritis. Insuper quatuor Americi Vespucii navigationes. Universalis Cosmographiae descriptio tam in solido quam plano, eis etiam insertis, quae Phtholomaeo ignota a nuperis reperta sunt* (1507), complete with letters by Vespucci [Briesemeister 2000];
3. Any information that More could have got through Catherine of Aragon at the court of Henry VIII;
4. *De Orbe Novo Decades* by Peter Martyr of Angleria (1511), some of whose information was first-hand;
5. Personal experience such as possibly watching the three Native Americans presented to Henry VII about 1502.

The earliest source of information on the New World was the first letter by Columbus which in a single year of 1493 was published in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Basel and three times in Paris. Being a mixture of fact, rumour and fiction, the Columbus letters were followed by multiple travel diaries, letters and relations on the wonders of the New World, one of which was *De Orbe Novo Decades* by Peter Martyr of Angleria and *Opus epistolarum* by the same author. Peter knew Columbus personally and met his relatives and crew. From them, he would get first-hand information on Native Americans. Thus, in a 1513 letter to Luis Hurtado de Mendoza he describes *los Caribes o caníbales* (‘Caribs, or cannibals’), while some other Native peoples are referred to as *amables* and *felices* (‘amiable’ and ‘happy’) [Armillas Vicente 2013: 224].

Another group of sources is works belonging or ascribed to Vespucci – above all, his journal published by Martin Waldseemüller under the title of *Quatuor navigationes*. It is exactly this book that More explicitly refers to in *Utopia*, claiming that Hythlodaeus had been in three voyages out of the four and that the book is widely read (the second claim indeed being true as of 1515).

But which specific details would More choose to pick up for his model of ‘The Best State of the Commonwealth’? Representations of the New World were highly variable, ranging from description of wonders and non-existent monsters to quite realistic portrayals of societies, customs and mores of Native Americans. The perception of the latter varied as much – from barbarians to noble savages.

Could More have picked up ‘utopian’ details from these sources? The New World was not infrequently described by travellers as a gold-age world of naked people and bountiful nature; Native Americans were seen as living happily and naturally, unaware of private property and unaffected by corruption [Colón 1930; Pedro Martir de Angleria 1989: 145-146, 202-203; Vespucio, 1985: 61].
However, negative characteristics also occur and sometimes proceed to the discourse of monstrosity: thus, Columbus describes man-eating dog-headed people and a kind of one-eyed cyclops [Colón 1930]. Vespucci treats Brazilian tribes as mostly barbarian and hardly little more than animals [Vespucio 1985: 79-80, 82, 83, 87, 105]. Peter Martyr of Angleria gives a gruesome description of cannibalistic traditions among Native Americans [Pedro Martir de Angleria 1989: 12].

However, exotic oddities, whether of heavenly or hellish kind, are of little interest for More, who remarks: ‘we made no inquiries after monsters, than which nothing is more common; for everywhere one may hear of ravenous dogs and wolves, and cruel men-eaters, but it is not so easy to find states that are well and wisely governed’.

In this context, particularly as far as America is concerned, we would like to single out the story of ‘Utopus, that conquered it [the country]..., brought the rude and uncivilised inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind’. Apparently, within More’s logic, the way to ‘the best state of commonwealth’ was introducing the best accomplishments of more civilized peoples to noble savages, unaware of property but capable of arts and crafts, and the one who could do its was a wise ruler. More may have perceived the reports of communal property among Natives as not unlike Plato’s ideas.

Notably, Utopia is an island. Based on textual evidence, parallels with Hispaniola or Cuba has been suggested [Ramos 1985: 234; Martínez Estrada 1963: 89-122]. By the time when *Utopia* was being written, America had already been recognized as a continent (rather than an island, as Columbus had believed). More could well have placed his perfect state within the parts of the continent that Waldseemüller believed to be uninhabited. However, he chose to place it on an island and preferred the older term ‘New World’ (*Mundo Nuevo*), rather than ‘America’, likely because it better corresponded his idea of a truly new and original society. The autarky and the isolation, characteristic of islands, that are palpable in More’s book, would later become two key traits of the classical model of utopia.

### Conclusion

It seems that More did not share the popular view that natural bonanza guaranteed happiness, nor would he idealize the ‘noble savage’; he had either little interest in wonders and curiosities. The information from contemporary sources – mostly mixture of fact and fantasy – was seen by him in no way uncritically. Rather than indulging in fantasy, More would cling to his specific interests, that is, the social basis of prosperity. The notion of collective property had been known to Plato and the Fathers of the Church, and the fact that it was found among the New World peoples, unspoiled by civilization, was in More’s view another proof that it was realistic enough.

It is possible therefore to speak of a dialectic interaction between fact and fiction in *Utopia*. Fact (such as historical persons or events) serves justification of fiction, making it plausible; fiction serves the presentation of the more perfect (and therefore, more real, from the Neo-Platonic point of view) world. The task of the fiction is visualising the possible.

However critical a modern reader may be about this ‘perfect’ world, the historical meaning of *Utopia* that gave rise to a whole branch of social philosophy cannot be underestimated.

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### References


The Real and The Fantastic in *Utopia* by Thomas More

According to popular belief, Thomas More’s *Utopia* belongs to the genre of social criticism in the form of speculative fiction. The name of the island, based on the play of words *ou-topos* / *eu-topos*, names of various locations and actors (city Amaurot is ‘foggy’, the river Anyder – ‘anhydrous’, Hythlodaeus – ‘versed in the nonsense’, etc.), many characteristics of an ideal society, which have little connection with the reality of that time, show evidence of correctness from this point of view. We can also use More’s self-irony as an argument for ‘whimsicality’ of this writing because author has not bothered to ask Hythlodaeus about the whereabouts of the island, and use the mention of a famous character in the text who doubts how to treat Utopia – as something true and really existing or as a pure fiction. The opposite position is represented by A. Morgan, H. Herzog, E. Estrada and others. According to Morgan, ‘there are different classes of evidence in the scope that More’s book, taken as a whole, is not a fantasy, but the story of the travelling to Peru’. Other authors see the historicity and reality of *Utopia* in the descriptions of the Cuba, others perceive a likeness between Utopian customs and traditions of the indigenous peoples of America, and still others pay attention to the target-focused criticism.

It is important to take into consideration the totality of the circumstances, connected with the writing of *Utopia*, in order to elucidate the ratio of the real and the fictional in this work. Among them are More’s staying in Antwerp in 1515, where the first book had been partially written and the second was finished; the presence of real historical figures: Peter Egidius (Peter Gillis) who, like More, was a friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam and ‘introduced’ More to Hythlodaeus, Cardinal George Morton at whose house More served as page when young, and More could have possibly reproduced in the book critical comments about the British behaviours that he heard at that time. It is necessary to take into account his possible sources of information about the New World: the letters of Columbus, diaries of travellers, Memoranda, *Decades*, etc. Additional area points we should mention works B. de Las Casas, G. Fernandez de Oviedo, Peter Martyr of Angleria, the book by A. Vespucci *El Nuevo Mundo* (‘The New World’) which was published in 1503. Only by placing the work in the socio-cultural context it may be possible to draw conclusions about the relationship of fiction and fact in *Utopia*.

**Keywords**

Utopia; Sir Thomas More; fiction; fact; the real; the fantastic; America; England; the New World

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