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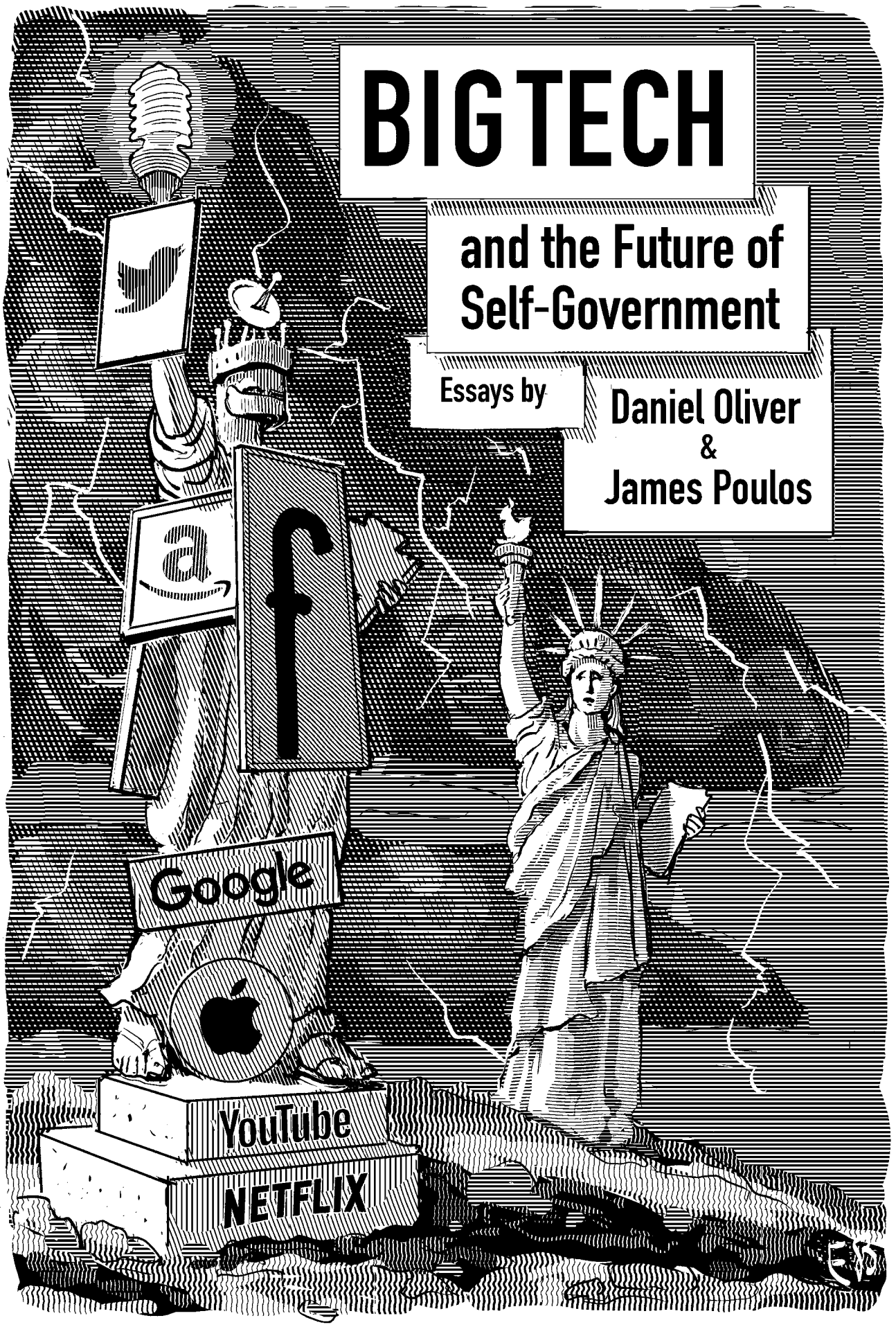

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Sir Thomas More by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1527

Book Review by Matthew Mehan

A Man for All Seasons

The Essential Works of Thomas More, edited by Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith.
Yale University Press, 1,520 pages, $100

If book reviews are villages and books are towns, then *The Essential Works of Thomas More* is a mighty metropolis long in the making. In one sense, it is no surprise that a single volume of Thomas More's works has not been published until now. King Henry VIII beheaded his old friend and lord chancellor—"merry master More"—when More refused to accept Henry as the self-declared head of both church and state. This suddenly made Europe's most celebrated poet-philosopher-statesman a complicated fellow to publish. Then there was the *Sturm und Drang* of the Reformation, which, as More foresaw, tore Christendom apart with war and enmity between its princes. There was no longer the same freedom, funding, or desire in the academy to collect and properly publish More's many works of poetry, history, political philosophy, theology, polemic, correspondence, and prayer.

Nevertheless, and despite much controversy, More has grown in reputation and renown over the centuries. In the lifetime after his death, one Anglican bishop of London saw fit to preach that More ought "to be honored" as an example for all leaders—"for his zeal," though not "for his religion." This was at a service in Saint Paul's Cathedral before Parliament and various ministers serving Henry VIII's daughter, Queen Elizabeth. Elizabethan playwrights, among them William Shakespeare, combined to honor More in a dramatic biography, *Sir Thomas More*. But Elizabeth's state censors ruled that much of the play must be scrapped for its depiction of the London riots that More helped to quell in 1517. The Master of Revels's warning is scrawled atop the surviving manuscript of this last play ever discovered in which Shakespeare had a considerable hand: publish or stage a public performance "at your perils," he wrote. The play depicts More as "the best friend the poor ever had," "the most religious politician," and "the worthiest counselor that tends our state." In a morality play-within-the-play, the *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, More plays the role of Good Counsel—a model of worldly practicality wed to profound study.

Later generations would agree with this assessment. More's fellow satirist, Jonathan Swift, said More "was the person of the greatest virtues these islands ever produced." The 20th century saw More canonized by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, as well as memorialized on stage and screen in the Oscar-winning *Man for All Seasons* (1960). He was even named "lawyer of the millennium" by the Law Society of Great Britain, and "Patron of Statesmen" by the philosopher and cold warrior Pope Saint John Paul II. Still, it was not until 1997—after 39 years of effort—that Yale University completed its gargantuan *Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. That "complete" collection is, alas, not quite complete. But its 15 volumes are a monumental resource, and *The Essential Works* draws from it extensively. More's complex life and controversial reputation as a defender of art, liberty, and law, have been treated in *The Essential Works* with decades of careful scholarly labor. The result is a hefty, handsome book in which, like a great city, a careful reader could spend a lifetime and still fail to know fully each of its stately halls and homey pubs.

On the cover is Hans Holbein's famous portrait of More, now hanging in New York's Frick Collection alongside Holbein's deliberately porcine Cromwell (with apologies to Hilary Mantel, whose novels feature a more lupine Cromwell). More's visage is that of the new Christian humanist, with stubbled beard—he's too busy to shave or worry about fashion—and eyes tilted just above the horizon. Here is a practical man of great consequence who has not lost sight of the transcendent. Behind him, a cloth of bright green symbolizes nature, that important grounding of More's political thought. The volume bears a telling resemblance to the second edition of the now-famous Riverside Shakespeare—and indeed both of the editors, Gerard B. Wegemer of the University of Dallas and Stephen W. Smith of Hillsdale College, originally backed into More studies by discovering More's influence upon Shakespeare. Perhaps this is why *The Essential Works* begins with More's English poetry: complex, multivocal meditations on the nature of power, eternity, love, honor, humor, and death. "More was 'a poet even in his prose,'" explain the editors, citing Erasmus's *Ciceronianus*. The young poet Shakespeare would have seen More, along with Geoffrey Chaucer, as a major poetical figure to imitate and surpass.

Next come More's translations into Latin of the ancient Greek satirist Lucian, rendered for us in English. Although the English poems are mostly early works, except a few written in the Tower of London at the end of his life, the Lucian translations represent a deepening of More's humanistic studies. And they are quite funny. Through them, More developed his famous Socratic irony and mocking wit (while Speaker of the House of Parliament, he was known as "Master Mock"). More not only translated Lucian's *Tyrannicide* but also wrote a witty reappraisal of political prudence and honor in response. The translations were popular in More's day throughout Europe, and they remain thematically important for our own political moment: in a time of disregard for piety and the past, and pathological media manipulation, such weightily ironic titles as *The Cynic*, *A Consultation with the Dead*, and *The Lover of Lies* may prove worthy of study today. As one comedic character from Lucian puts it, the dialogues teach "the way of mortal affairs."

Featured as well in the collection are More's historical writings: *The Life of John Pico*, an ironic Plutarchian translation and subtle reworking of the Italian Humanist Pico della Mirandola's biography, and More's own *History of Richard III*. *The Life of Pico* is a searching psychological profile of a famous, yet negligent intellectual, who convinces both himself and many around him that he has fulfilled his duties to both God and man, when, alas, he has not. If carefully read, this character study could inoculate against today's dysfunctional attitude toward scholarly liberty and the widespread disaffection from public service and patriotic zeal: "Liberty above all things [Pico] loved to which both his own natural affection and the study of philosophy inclined him, and for that was he always wandering and flitting and would never take himself to any certain

dwelling." The work is also a finely crafted examination of More's own conscience in preparation for public life and the trials of fame. He then wrote his second history, *Richard III*, once in Latin and again in English. Thomas More labored over two substantially different versions so as to better understand how Latin terms and concepts of Roman republicanism fit into English, thereby strengthening the English-speaking people's common sense on such subjects as tyranny, self-government, law, and consent. It is a demonstrable fact (More coined the term "fact") that Shakespeare followed More's history closely in his first tetralogy of plays, the three *Henry VI* histories that culminate with *Richard III*. Shakespeare's *Richard*, like More's, is a careful psychological and political study of audacious tyranny and civil war. Shakespeare launched his career, then, by reconsidering More's account of the political, moral, and institutional causes of civil strife in England.

In More's *Richard III*, an ambiguous narrator calmly and ironically assesses Richard's despotism as a special failure of those in positions of authority, especially the nobles—yesteryear's version of our own self-styled "elites." The intricate errors in judgment and character committed by both Richard's allies and his opponents, often related through reconstructed speeches *à la* Thucydides, furnish a pedagogy for leaders in training. More does so not only by offering a sustained critique of the feuding monarchs and aristocrats of England, but also by beginning to hint at republican principles such as the protection of family and property (*res-*) and the consent of the governed (*-publica*). When one aristocrat advocates before the citizens of London for popular approval of the new tyrant Richard, he does so with Ciceronian concepts: "[You have sorely longed for t]he surety of your own bodies, the quiet of your wives and your daughters, the safeguard of your goods—of all which things in times past ye stood evermore in doubt." One can almost hear his disapproval of the quartering act in this line. Indeed, More refrained from publishing *Richard III* in his own lifetime—perhaps because he feared reprisals from the royal family, or perhaps because he later found in *Utopia* a more affable, witty, and even Lucian way to raise fundamental political questions. Like the *Life of Pico*, then, *Richard III* reads as a strenuous private preparation for political life. Yet it was of such quality that it was inserted posthumously into Edward Hall's official "English chronicle histories." From there it was dropped with very little change into Holinshed's *Chronicles*, upon which Shakespeare relied heavily for his many English history plays.

Next in *The Essential Works* comes More's humanistic middle age. *Utopia* is a complex dialogue; as the editors note, it takes up some of the classical and Christian traditions' most "vital questions": "What is the best way for human beings to live, both personally and politically? What does humanity need to flourish in justice, peace, friendship, and concord? What kind of citizens and leaders does a commonwealth (*respublica*) need to achieve such ends?" These are not easy questions, and *Utopia* is not easy—though it is easily misread. Commendably, the editors alert us to some of More's ironic modes of communication, while taking care not to give clear answers of their own. The footnotes, taken in most part from Clarence Miller's 2001 Yale University Press edition, make it easier to navigate the many Greek puns and literary allusions More makes to Cicero, Plato, Augustine, Virgil, Erasmus, Plutarch, Lucian, Seneca, the Psalms, Homer, and even More's own Latin epigrams. These epigrams were published together with the third edition of *Utopia* and may serve as a helpful interpretive key to the proto-republican theory hidden within both works, a theory that privileges wise counsel over energetic power in just the way our own Constitution privileges Article 1 over Article 2. There are even indications in *Utopia* of the importance of mixing one's labor as an initial claim to property, thereby favoring the people—in More's case, the serfs—as the property owners of the land they work, who possess, in turn, a claim to property according to natural right and long custom even in the face of claims of aristocratic privilege and title.

And yet, at the same time, *Utopia* coins the words "utopia" and "utopian." It thoughtfully chastises theorists who invent impossible political systems which, if ever deployed, would lead to, say, famine in the Ukraine. But More is not so simple as to be content with warning against idealism. *Utopia* also develops a sustained examination of slothful pragmatism, the sort that has no ideals and thus no lodestars by which to steer the ship of state. More's teaching here is at once politically wide in scope and granular in detail; ultimately, he intimates that a truly excellent statesman is one who has learned to balance a powerful and truthful image of the good life with political reality. He must govern without becoming enslaved either to ideals or to things as they are. *Utopia* can train aspiring politicians today to avoid outlandishly naïve fantasies of socialism while keeping sight of lofty principles like equality, rightly understood.

With his typical wit, More the lawyer has the mythical isle of Utopia ban all lawyers for being too "clever" and "sly." Simplicity in law, and in one's dealings with fellow citizens, is good as an abstract principle. But if radically implemented, it spells disaster. One notes again a precursor to Shakespeare's first tetralogy: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," declares the mobocratic rebel Jack Cade in *Henry VI, Part 2*. More's Utopians take legitimate aspirations ("in other countries, straightforwardness is difficult to obtain because there is a mass of incredibly intricate laws") and couches them in absurd extremes (therefore, "ban absolutely all lawyers") as a warning against their foolish implementation (see: Jack Cade). Peppered among its absurd institutions, *Utopia* does suggest a few moderate republican reforms. These are ironically proposed by the Odyssean character Raphael Hythloday, whose name means both "healer of God" and "skilled speaker of nonsense." More's *Utopia* takes up that vital statesmanlike consideration summed up in the first part of its long Latin title: "DE OPTIMO REIPUBLICAE STATU," or "ON THE BEST STATE OF A REPUBLIC."

Pressing on through this vast anthological metropolis, we pass by More's many personal letters—some revealing profound and winsome judgments on education, family life, friendship, and political prudence, others depicting the high drama of More's difficult friendship with King Henry and the "great matter" of his divorce. Then his humanist letters, one of which—the Letter to Oxford—defends the liberal arts and sciences against attack from some of the Oxford faculty (*plus ça change*...). Next comes a treatise on *The Four Last Things*, an elaborate *memento mori* with reflections on death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Passing by all these side streets, we arrive downtown among More's largest works: his fierce polemics and gentle, Socratic dialogues.

More's great explosion of rhetorical and polemical energy cannot all be contained in a single volume. The editors' solution to this problem is to pair a website with the tome: www.essentialmore.org is host to massive concordances and complete texts of all the most lengthy polemics. Much of the *Response to Luther*, More's inaugural religious polemic in the spirit of that age, is online. But the volume itself contains the entire Socratic *Dialogue of Sir Thomas More, Knight*, later and more glibly called the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. This unusual text, which C.S. Lewis considered the best English dialogue, employs More's formidable poetic and rhetorical arts in a merry conversation between a young "messenger," uncertain of the Catholic faith, and More himself. Also complete is More's famous *Apology* and other religious writings. But many of his other mighty polemics, including the 1,000-page *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, are mostly online. These polemics reveal two key points: first, that religious

controversies of the time were very much political and legal controversies as well, and second, that More was one hell of a fighter.

Take, for example, his battles with William Tyndale over scriptural interpretation. In them, More was also arguing with Henry VIII by proxy. Henry had accepted the novel theory of divine right of kings, which paved the way for caesaropapism and the amalgamation of church and state. For More, Tyndale's attempt to make religious arguments for divine right was tantamount to a constitutional revolution. It violated Magna Carta's first article: "*quod Anglicana ecclesia libera sit*," "that the English church shall be free." This principle, later echoed in the first clause of our own First Amendment, reaffirmed the disjunct sovereignty of political and theological authorities. More would decry the violation of Magna Carta again, at the very end of his long trial and imprisonment for the charge of treason.

As for More the fighter, in the *Confutation of Tyndale*, More charges his opponents, for one of their many "pestilent infidelities," with being more offensive than "all the devils in hell"—in this case, for undermining the natural authority of political power: "[Tyndale et al. say] I do them wrong [to call] their books seditious.... They bid the people for a countenance to be obedient. But they say therewith that the laws and precepts of their sovereign do nothing to bind the subjects in their consciences [except where] commanded or forbidden in Scripture." Now that *The Essential Works* is both in print and fully online, much that is too little-known about More's legal, political, and religious thought can be more widely studied.

Last on our city tour comes the interior palace of More's writing: the Tower Works, written in the Tower of London while More awaited trial and execution. Though eventually forbidden to see family and friends, he was permitted a collection of books for much of the time. The great dialogue written in this period is *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*. "Comfort" here means "to strengthen": More's dialogue is a far cry from the softer, modern-day sense of "comfort." More aims to strengthen both the reader and himself for the trials of life and death. Positing the person and passion of Christ as the most perfect comfort, More blends and adapts Cicero, Seneca, and Boethius with Christian belief. The setting is the fall of Hungary before the infidel Turks, during which a young man seeks the counsel of his old uncle as society unravels around him. The biting implication is clear: More's own persecution is at the hands of a new kind of violent infidel, namely the king. The dialogue considers just how one can live, given such violent and unjust circumstances, without succumbing to despair, fear, or impotent rage—or doomscrolling on Twitter.

The essential works then presents another Tower Work: More's *Sadness of Christ*, a meditation on Christ's agony in the garden from the Gospel of Matthew. It is at once a theological commentary and an ironic counsel to Henry and to corrupt nobles and prelates, cast as betrayers and sleepy apostles. There are also a number of touching Tower letters, the last of which is scribbled in coal on the morning of his death, intended for his daughter Meg. More writes, "Farewell my dear child, and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends that we may merrily meet in heaven." After various prayers and devotions that More wrote or collected, principally from among the Psalms, *The Essential Works* offers a thoughtful reconstruction of his trial. Remarkably, he concludes by addressing his persecutors much as he did Meg, though the agents of the state have just condemned him to be drawn and quartered: "[T]hough we disagree in this life, [I hope we] will nevertheless agree in another life in perfect charity." And then, "More have I not to say, my lords, but that...I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together." The words are truly More's, mediated by only very recently translated court proceedings (2011), represented smartly in *The Essential Works*.

The capstone of this deft literary portrait of Thomas More is a final section containing various early accounts of More's life, death, and reputation. These accounts round out the picture of More as a man "born for friendship" (Erasmus); as one born a native "son" of London by right of citizenship, but a "father" of England by right of the "benefits" he bestowed upon its citizens (Reginald Pole); and as one whose profound "study is the general watch of England" (the playwrights of *Sir Thomas More*). Shakespeare worked on *Sir Thomas More* in the middle of his career, and at the end of his career he co-authored *Henry VIII*, in which More is given favorable mention. *The Essential Works of Thomas More* presents before us one of our most insightful political thinkers, a towering, urbane figure that loomed large in the imagination of the English-speaking people's greatest poet. If Shakespeare saw fit to study More so deeply, we may thank the editors of the present volume for permitting us the opportunity to do likewise.

Matthew Mehan is director of academic programs and assistant professor of government at Hillsdale College in Washington, D.C.