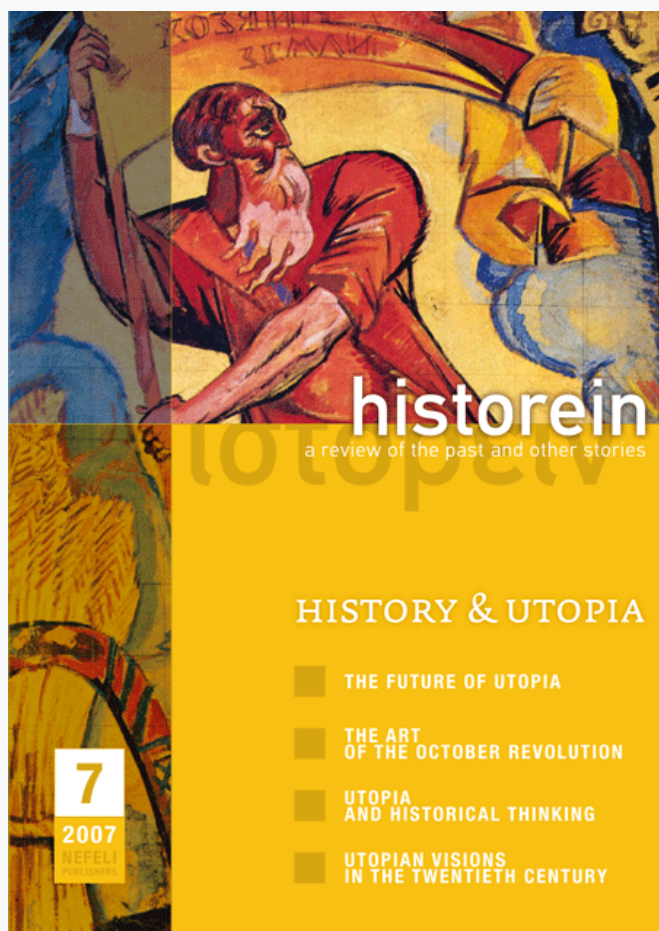


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A Contribution to the Archaeology of Modern Utopian Thought: History and Utopia in Plethon's Oeuvre

Yannis Smarnakis

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At first sight, it seems that the “nature” of utopian thinking differs from history. Historical narration is an interpretation of past experiences, carried out in order to understand the present and develop a perspective for the future. Utopian thinking is a way of transgressing or even negating the present state of things and imagining a perfect society, an ideal human condition, or the ‘not yet being’. Moreover the development of history as a discipline is grounded on a strong anti-utopian bias. As Hayden White has argued, the development of a historical method, conceived as objective and empirical, to replace a philosophy of history, conceived as inherently metaphysical, opposed “a properly dis

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ply the “repressed” of history; the two interact with each other in various ways.

First of all, utopia is in history. Its view of the ideal human condition is affected by the social and cultural context in which it appears. The utopian visions escape from reality but, at the same time, they are also constrained by the sort of society in which they are conceived. The desire for a ‘better way of being’ may sound universal, but as Ruth Levitas argues, utopia “is a social construct which arises
Yannis Smarnakis

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always socially constructed, interacts with a specific historical and cultural context and becomes a field of exploration for the needs, desires and dreams of a society.

Secondly, the history of modern utopias in Europe begins with the birth of modernity.³ The European utopian thought formed in this period collided with typical medieval attitudes and values. Elements of the ideal human condition can also be found in medieval texts, incorporated, however, in the discourse of religion. For example, Augustine's classic work *De Civitate Dei* is substantially anti-utopian. Here the perceptible world is presented as the dark lobby of the true, after-death life. Augustine believed that the perfect human condition was not feasible in the world of senses. The human completion could only be achieved in the "City of God", which was conceived as the direct opposite of the "City of Man". These elements are typical for Christian utopian discourse. The medieval utopias usually dealt with metaphysical situations, which transcended the limits of earthly life. Christian eschatology and millennialism provided the basic intellectual framework for the utopian visions of the era.⁴

Of course, there were exceptions. A few examples of medieval utopias exist which deal with earthly life. Their ideal land usually takes the form of a village where anyone could fulfil his desires. In some cases, this village belongs to an ideal feudal world, with strong knightly values. This happy golden age is usually projected back into a not too distant past and connected with the reign of a historical ruler or with a character from a heroic tale. This age is not impending, as is usually perceived in modern times, but lies behind us, in the past and ends in the death of a particular king. A set of typical medieval concepts is apparent in these ideal worlds: rural life is preferable to the urban one; the fundamental principles of society are informed by feudal values; the golden age lies in a bygone historical era because the past is considered better than the future.⁵

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a new utopian discourse came to life in early modern Europe. The aim of this paper is to explore the interrelation of history and utopia in European thought of this era, through the paradigm of the Byzantine philosopher Georgius Gemistos or Plethon. Plethon was a major protagonist in fifteenth-century intellectual life.⁶ He wrote philosophical, historical, geographical and political treatises. The most interesting of his works are the *Laws*, a text written in imitation of the homonymous Platonic one,⁷ in which he constructs a new paganistic religion that is grounded in solid Neoplatonic and Stoic arguments. The gods of this "Hellenic" religion represent abstract ideas and their positions in the whole system are strictly predetermined as well as being hierarchically ordered. In 1438/9 Plethon participated in the Byzantine delegation to Italy which took part in the council for the Union of the Churches. In Florence he preferred to give lectures on and discuss Platonic philosophy with Italian humanists rather than to argue with Catholic clerics about Christian doctrines. The Platonic circle of Florence, whose most distinguished member was Leonardo Bruni, received the Byzantine philosopher with great enthusiasm and was impressed by his arguments. This article seeks to answer two main questions: what is the interrelation of history and utopia in Plethon's oeuvre and, secondly, what is the place of Plethonic utopian thought in the corpus of Renaissance utopias?

Plethon is the author of a short history of ancient Greece, which covers the years between 362 and 336 BC. This work is not an original one; Plethon's main sources are Diodorus and Plutarch. However, his references to historical events are very frequent, especially in his political treatises.

As I have discussed elsewhere, in detail, Plethon's interpretations of history,⁸ here I will offer a brief survey of his attitudes towards the historical past.

Plethon shows a special preference in citing and commenting on events from the history of classic antiquity. The ancient Greek city-states of the fifth and fourth century BC and the Roman republican and early imperial era are his favourite themes. The Christian past is totally neglected. Plethon is not interested in the history of Christianity. His own historical time is, mainly, that of Greek and Roman antiquity. In an approach characterised by determinism, historical events are interpreted in the context of a theory of the rise and fall of states. The course of history is affected by the quality of regimes and the moral and political values of their leaders. War has its own ethics, which are dependent on the specific historical conditions and on the type of juxtaposition. The total annihilation of opponents is considered a just purpose, but only in cases involving foreigners. The magnanimity and the will to find a peaceful solution must prevail in cases of war against people of the same "race". Within this framework, metaphysics are completely absent. Traditional ideas of Byzantine historiography on Divine Providence, which pulls the strings of human history, from the Creation to the Final Judgment and punishes the people for their sins, have been abandoned.

Plethon's interests are secular and they concern the political life and the competition between states. The knowledge of the past serves as a guide for the present political scene. His main aim is the reform of Byzantine institutions, which will lead, in his view, to the restoration of imperial power. The necessity of reform is proved through the interpretation and the evaluation of various analogous historical events, which are chosen from the ancient Greco-Roman world. Thus, history acquires an exemplary and didactic content: the ancient civilisations of the Greeks and the Romans are not only admired for their achievements, but they mainly provide political models to imitate.

These characteristics are analogous to the uses of history by the Western Renaissance.⁹ The metaphor of a 'renaissance' or a 'rebirth' underlines the reappearance of an initial condition and stresses the exemplary reception of history. The ancient world of the Greeks and Romans is considered as the archetype for political and social life. Thus, historians read and interpreted classical texts in order to solve contemporary political and military problems. In this way, early modernity took shape during this period, with various moments of antiquity proving exemplary in this regard. The identification with the classical past expressed the need of Renaissance intellectuals to return to archetypal values and behaviours.

Within this framework of attitudes, where the ancient world is considered as a model for how rulers should perform, politics acquires a new meaning. Cicero's utterance "*historia magistra vitae*" becomes the main doctrine for historians and politicians alike. The writer and the reader of history is now, usually, a person of the court. Political reading means above all, the study of history and the search, in classical and later texts, for examples of good and evil, prudent and imprudent conduct. The results of this particular way of reading history can be seen not only in the many treatises on the talents of the "good" prince but also in dozens of historical paintings.¹⁰

The obvious conclusion is that Plethon, as a reader and writer of history, shared two basic assumptions with Western historians of his era. History is perceived as exemplary and didactic by

both. Moreover the historical knowledge of antiquity has a moral and political meaning; it provides paradigms of “good” or “bad” regimes, rulers and political acts, and, by presenting the experience of others, history becomes moral philosophy teaching by examples. Only ‘men of action’, that is, rulers, statesmen, or generals were capable of writing instructive historical accounts. But how is this concept of history related to Plethon’s utopian visions?

Let’s see an outline of his utopias. The book of *Laws* was primarily a treatise on the ideal state and religion. Unfortunately, the patriarch of Constantinople, Georgios Gennadios-Scholarios, burned it few years after Plethon’s death. A few fragments have survived, which mainly describe the “Hellenic” religion, its deities and ceremonies.¹¹ But Plethon had earlier written two memoranda, where he proposed new models of social organisation for the Byzantine Peloponnese. The first one was sent to the despot Theodore II between 1407 and 1415, while the second one was written in 1418, its recipient being Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus in Constantinople.¹² These two texts are the main sources for his utopian plans.

The older memorandum relies on Platonic dialogues and outlines a model of social organisation similar to the one described by Plato in his *Timaeus*. Three “classes” compose the ideal society: the manual workers (farmers, shepherds and “all those who by their own labour produce fruit from the land”); the suppliers of services (merchants, manufacturers, retailers, etc.); and finally the members of the upper or “first class”, to which judges, rulers and soldiers belong. At the head of the whole social pyramid is the despot. The two lower social groups pay taxes to the members of the ruling “class”. They constitute a sort of “gift” for the important services that the rulers offer to the community.¹³

These three social groups must not be allowed to trespass on each other’s functions.¹⁴ The law must forbid the engagement of rulers in trade or other “illiberal business”. Plethon stresses particularly the importance of the “first class” in the functioning of his ideal society: its members protect the community from enemies, they impose the law, and they supervise all the other citizens. They must be dedicated to warfare and their style of living should not be luxurious, as they are the example for the whole of society.¹⁵ The total revenue of the country is divided into three parts: that for the agricultural workers, the providers of resources (land, vines, cattle, etc.), and the members of the “first class”.¹⁶

This ideal society contains a strong religious element. Plethon proposes three central dogmas: first, the existence of a pre-eminent deity; second, that this deity exercises care over mankind and regulates all human affairs; third, it regulates in a just manner everything according to its own judgment and without any influence from human oblations or sacrifices, since it has no need of mankind. Religious ceremonies should be simple, being symbols of recognition that all human benefits emanate from this pre-eminent deity.¹⁷

Of the three possible political systems (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy), Plethon argues that monarchy is the best when it is based on good laws and when the king surrounds himself with educated advisers of modest property. The author sharply criticises democracy. According to his view, the mass of the population is uneducated, and unfit to vote and to decide on important issues.

He also rejects oligarchy, as a narrow circle of advisers which usually acts selfishly. The educated “middle class” provides the best political advisers; they are willing to serve the interests of the whole society, while both the rich and the poor consider only their own interests.¹⁸

Plethon’s view that monarchy is the ideal regime was strongly influenced by the Platonic preference for monarchy, manifested in *Timaeus* and other dialogues.¹⁹ Both writers believe that the “middle class” intellectuals are the best advisers to monarchs and they have to take responsibility for the fortunes of the state. A hierarchical order of political systems exists; the social pyramid is crowned by an “enlightened” monarchy. Oligarchy is the next best option, while democracy is strongly criticised. Plethon’s criticism of the cheap motives of the mass implies a snobbish attitude towards the uneducated lower social groups.

A completely different ideal society is described in the second memorandum. Here Plethon proposes the division of the Peloponnesians into two groups: the soldiers and the farmers, who have to pay tax. Those who performed military service should be tax exempt. The people of the country are divided into the two groups, according to their skills. Taxes are paid in kind and not in cash. The payment in cash, as it took place at frequent intervals during the year, was considered unsuitable for taxpayers and tax collectors. A single tax paid in kind once a year to a single collector is a fair and bearable measure.²⁰ The new society is completely different from the one proposed in the earlier memorandum: the soldiers and the farmers who pay taxes constitute the community, while the third social group, the suppliers of services, is totally neglected.

The country’s revenue is shared between the people through a process analogous to the one described in the previous “ideal” society. The producers take the first part, while the owners of the means of production (land, pasture, cattle, vines, etc.) are entitled to the second; the soldiers are the beneficiaries of the third part. If a producer is also the provider of his own capital resources, he should keep two-thirds of his production and pay only one-third to the community. Those who work on state lands are entitled to only one-third of revenue, the rest belonging to the state. Finally, the joint-owner of the means of production retains half of the total income of the land.²¹

Plethon refers to the second “class” of farmers as “helots” as they support, through their work, the military forces of the country. They should be protected from any further exploitation, such as additional taxes or compulsory labour.²² The use of the term “helots” indicates the author’s intension to devaluate manual labour. In this regard, Plethon is influenced by Plato’s demeriting of the servile workers who do not partake in intellectual life. Moreover, the term “helots” is a reference to ancient Spartan society and its institutions. In the *Laws*, Plethon expresses his preference for this classical city-state.²³

The two “classes” of farmers and soldiers constitute the body of the new society. Another distinct social group, the priests, is also part of his “ideal” community. Prayer and the care for the souls of the faithful are important social functions, according to Plethon. Senior priests, as they exercise their ministry for the common good, should have a number of “helots” at their service, proportional to the amount that a middle-ranking army officer has at his disposal.²⁴ The reference to priests is followed by an attack on monks. The author notes that monks claim to be phi-

losophers and for this reason they demand the right to collect revenues of the state. But, in reality, they contribute nothing to society. They live a life apart, concerned only for their own souls. They should have no other revenue apart from the income from monastic property and should pay the regular tax for the defence of the state.²⁵

Plethon outlines a different ternary social model in this second treatise. The Platonic model has been abandoned and the group of the priests has replaced the service suppliers as the third component of society. The new three “classes” exercise separate social functions. The farmers provide the community with the necessary foodstuffs, the priests are responsible for the salvation of the faithful, and the soldiers for protecting the whole of society. Their role is important as they defend the state and its economic activities from exterior threats. The social functions of the new society are analogous to the three-tiered feudal system in the medieval West, especially in France.²⁶ Thus, Plethon gives a typical medieval answer to the question on the ideal political and social condition. The “new” system is, ultimately, the feudal society of the Middle Ages, in its pure form.

In the social context of the Byzantine despotate, this ternary model served the interests of a political aristocracy, which was very close to the despot and held high positions in the governmental mechanism. This social stratum was not, usually, of Peloponnesian origin. Most of its members were Constantinopolitans who came to the despotate in search of titles and lands. They were loyal to the despot, but their relations with local landowners were rather bad. The two groups antagonised each other through competition for privileges, titles and lands. Plethon was an active member of this group.

On the other hand, the local landowners, with their economic power and high social status, were a permanent threat to the authority of the central government in Mystras. Their main goal was to advance up the administrative or military hierarchy. They often turned against the despot of the Byzantine Peloponnese, sometimes allying with the Franks in order to further their goals. In the regions close to the borders, in particular, it seemed that central authority was very loose. In these zones the great local families were very strong, often exercising their own semi-autonomous policy.²⁷

Fifteenth-century Byzantine Peloponnese was still a country “under construction”. The presence of the central government was weak in the borderlands. The powerful local aristocracy struggled against the despots in Mystras, seeking more privileges and power. Moreover, Constantinople, the centre of the empire, was far away and too weak to influence, in a decisive way, the political and social life of this remote peninsula. Plethon’s “new” hierarchical social system gave a final form to a society that was still characterised by fluidity and instability. The opposition between the central government and the local aristocracy would be blunted, the privileges of the landowners and the Church would be ensured, while the army would regain its strength. The aristocracy and the Church would carry out distinguishable social functions. The local aristocrats, as leaders of the soldiers, would ensure the safety of the community, while the Church would attend to the moral elevation of the faithful.

Plethon considers his favourite system, monarchy, as a force of social and political reform. The recipients of his utopian plans are the despot and the emperor, who are responsible for the re-

alisation of the new ideal society. The changes in the social pyramid must begin from the top and the rulers have to impose them on the various social strata. Thus, not only is the political order undisputed, it is strengthened, as monarchy constitutes for Plethon an institution capable of imposing social change.

Finally, Plethon's ideas about the perfect state depend on the limits of medieval Byzantine society. The concepts of order and hierarchy that prevail throughout the world and human societies, as well as the concern for the safety and the defence of the community, are underlined and stressed in his utopian programme. It is also obvious that in Plethon's view history and utopia share a common ground. The ideal society must be modelled on previous 'successful' historical examples. An early Platonic utopia from the world of antiquity and the ternary social system of the feudal West are his main sources of reference. The knowledge of the past becomes an essential condition for the construction of the ideal society. History is a guide for the future, as it provides perfect models for imitation. This is a typical fifteenth-century Renaissance idea. However, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European utopian thought did not share the same basic assumptions.

In the utopian literature of this era new ideas and values arise.²⁸ They are secular in character, as they are concerned with the earthly life and not the celestial order of things. They emphasise the idea of an essentially good human nature, or at least they believe in the perfectibility of the human existence. They usually blend Hellenic rationalism with a new democratising impulse. They often embody conflicting elements, such as the need for order and centralised, large-scale organisations, in addition to the desire for freedom and the importance of local autonomy and individual creativity. In doing so, they often follow one or the other principle to its logical extreme. However, this is also part of their value. In their attempt to resolve the dilemmas of the emerging modern society – such as the contradictory concepts of order and freedom, reason and religion, equality and hierarchy – they dramatise them in a vivid and highly effective way. Every utopia generates competing utopias and all together they contribute to the intellectual life and the debates of the era.

The European discovery of the New World is also a significant formative influence on early modern utopian literature.²⁹ Travellers' tales about unknown, distant countries becomes an essential part of utopian narration. Of course, the influence of Platonic dialogues is very strong too. In *Timaeus* and *Critias*, Plato tells a story about the civilisation of Atlantis, which Solon had heard during his travel in Egypt. The discovery of the New World, however, gave birth to many tales about distant countries and foreign people with peculiar customs and provided the raw material for the creation of new ideal societies. The travel literature of the era deeply influenced the form and content of utopian discourse. Europe opened up to the world and utopia became, in the long term, more global in its reach.

The best example of an early modern utopia remains, of course, More's *Utopia*, which functions as an ironic and satirical commentary on contemporary Christian society. Here the central doctrines are a universal and fundamental egalitarianism, the recognition of the necessity and dignity of labour and a rationalism derived from the Platonic model. More's major contribution to the history of utopian thought is a new democratic way of organising human affairs. The 'good' life extends to everyone and is not available only to the few, as in Plato's *Republic*. In this ancient

Greek utopia, a mass of servile workers exists which does not participate in the intellectual activities of the community. This does not necessarily mean that everyone in More's *Utopia* practises philosophy. But everyone, whatever his place in the hierarchy, still shares in the "ideal" life of his utopian island. In More's work, the whole of society is the embodiment of reason; in doing this, More democratised reason and moved far beyond the Platonic archetype.³⁰

A comparison with More's *Utopia* points out the rather archaic form of Plethon's utopian plans. While the former transcends the conceptual limits of the Platonic utopian tradition, the latter seeks paradigms in classic and medieval texts. While More escapes from reality in order to imagine his ideal world and to criticise contemporary society, Plethon attempts to stabilise the established social and political order. His utopian thought corresponds to problems of the new era, but his answers remain rather traditional.

On the other hand, it must be said that Renaissance utopias maintain an exemplary and didactic character. Their common goal is to propose leaders to create new societies with strong moral values. Many of the famous utopias were written by priests and monks, such as Johannes Valentinus Andreae and Tommaso Campanella. The religious purpose remained dominant in virtually every utopia written up to the end of the seventeenth century. For example, in Campanella's *City of the Sun*, the sacrament of confession is an important element. The writer presents rather old-fashioned views on confession in a work that portrays a future society based on natural law. Campanella overcomes this apparent contradiction, however, by suggesting that sacramental penance, properly conceived, is solidly based on naturalist aspirations.³¹ Andreae's *Christianopolis* is another example. Here the main aim is the creation of a 'truly' Christian society. Moreover these utopias are addressed to the rulers of the era, who are responsible for the diffusion of the new moral values through society. In this way, the established order of things is not disputed and monarchy is viewed as a reforming social force, exactly as in Plethon's writings.³²

However, there was no place for history in early modern utopian thought. The ideal society was a product of reason, ethics or nature; history simply retained its didactic content, as the past experiences provided guidelines for the future. For the people of the sixteenth century there was a common historical plane; in this way, the differences between the various periods of history were eliminated, while their similarities were stressed.³³ On the other hand, utopian time was almost frozen. More's *Utopia* was, like most of the ideal cities of the ancient world, technologically static and totally indifferent to the concepts of time or progress. It existed outside history, in a separate domain, where the knowledge of the past had no meaning.³⁴

The differences between this concept and Plethon's attitudes towards history and utopia are apparent. In the Renaissance, they do not share a common starting point. Utopia and history exist in separate worlds and accomplish different roles. The former becomes a powerful tool for exploring the needs and the desires of society, while the latter retains its traditional educational content. Finally, Plethon's oeuvre represents a very early form of modern utopian thought, in which the divorce of utopia and history had not yet taken place.

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- ~ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, New York: Philip Allan, 1990, pp. 181–82.
- Of course, utopia is not a sixteenth-century European invention. It can also be found in totally different cultural traditions. On this subject, see Zhang Longxi, "The Utopian Vision, East and West", *Utopian Studies* 13:1 (2002), pp. 1–19, where the author examines the utopian vision as manifest in Chinese philosophy and literature. Among the writers he discusses in his paper are Tao Yuanming and Liu Yuxi.

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For the destruction of the book and the manuscript tradition of the fragments that survived, see Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, pp. 393f.

- ~ The texts have been published by Spiridon Lambros (ed.), *Παλαιολογία και Πελοποννησιακά*, vol. 3, pp. 246–65 and vol. 4, pp. 113–35, Athens: Gregoriades, 1912–1930.

- Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 119, 23–120, 24.

Ibid., vol. 4, 121, 1–4.

€Ibid., vol. 4, 121, 5–14, 124, 5–10, 131, 19–132, 10.

Ibid., vol. 4, 123, 15–124, 4.

Ibid., vol. 4, 125, 3–22. These central dogmas are in accord with main principles of Plethon's "Hellenic" religion. For the attributes of the supreme god in the *Laws*, see Pléthon, *Traité des Lois*, pp. 44, 14–46, 7, 168, 21–172, 26, 202, 4–204, 14, 216, 3–12, 220, 11–20, 272–274.

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~ Ibid., pp. 254, 11–255, 17.

~ Ibid., pp. 255, 17–256, 4.

~ •Pléthon, *Traité des Lois*, p. 2, 10–14.

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• Thomas Renna, "Campanella's City of the Sun and Late Renaissance Italy", *Utopian Studies* 10:1 (1999), pp. 13–25. See also John M. Headley, *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997.

~ For the didactic and exemplary character of several Renaissance Utopias, even in cases such as Doni's *New World*, where the political values of the Cinquecento are disputed, see Paul F. Grendler, "Utopia in Renaissance Italy: Doni's 'New World'", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29:4 (1965), pp. 479–94 (=idem,

Culture and Censorship in Late Renaissance Italy and France, London: Variorum Reprints, 1981, no. 4).

- • Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 4.
- Berger, *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*, p. 68; Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*", p. 291.