

Of Fountains and Foundations: An Elaboration on Åke Bergvall*

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Åke Bergvall offers a careful and interesting assessment of Thomas Starkey's treatment of freedom in the *Dialogue Between Pole and Lupset*. Bergvall summarises the main theories by which Starkey was likely influenced, and proposes that Augustine's "synthesis of sacred and secular values" (223) is the best candidate for explaining Starkey's position. Augustine's mature thinking "saw reason and faith as necessary and complementary categories, operating within distinct spheres" (216), and, as "a humanist with evangelical sympathies" (221), Starkey thought much the same thing. This places him closer to Luther than to Ficino, though we cannot rule out Ficino's influence.

Bergvall's article belongs with a great amount of scholarship on English Humanism that tracks genealogies of ideas, assessing their effects on politics and culture. But when we are assured that Starkey's position is Augustinian, a question immediately arises about what then are the differences between Starkey and his sources. If there are none, then why read Starkey instead of Augustine, and why have scholars missed the point for so long? And if there are differences (as I assume is the case) how do we describe them and why are they important?

There are two main approaches to this question about how to describe the differences. The first would provide a further, more subtle kind of genealogy, claiming, for instance, that Starkey combines Augustine's main ideas with concepts drawn from Ficino, or Marsilio of Padua, or John Colet, and so on, and this network of influences then accounts for the particular texture of the Starkey fabric. A second approach would

*Reference: Åke Bergvall, "Reason in English Renaissance Humanism: Starkey, More, and Ascham," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 213-25.

be to say that Starkey adds something of his own to the materials he receives. For instance, he might develop new concepts, or confirm his position by a distinctive use of figurative language.

Here I want to concentrate on the second of these possibilities, and to consider Starkey's figurative language, by which I mean, simply, some of the basic images his speakers deploy to confirm their main arguments. Starkey's imagery is interesting not only as an indicator of his originality, but also because it implies a set of values relevant to the political ideas set out in the *Dialogue* at large. My attention to imagery stands then in relation to Bergvall's interest in ideas, rather as Starkey's own imagery stands in relation to the political theories he propounds.

For convenience, given the scope of this brief essay, let us consider Starkey's frequent allusions to fountains and springs. Mainly, these suggest spontaneity; thus, the "fountayn of al natural powarys" (32)¹ "spryngeth out of the hart" (33). But this image is everywhere qualified by Starkey in two main ways. First, fountains are consistently represented in tandem with an equally persistent emphasis on the image of a "foundation" or "ground" and Starkey is endlessly preoccupied with the notion that strong foundations are needed for freedom and growth. Thus, a sound body is "the ground and foundatyon of the wele of man" (24); Pole insists on establishing the "ground and foundatyon" (31) of the debate before proceeding with a free exchange of conversation; Lupset worries that changes in inheritance laws will "take away the foundatyon and ground of al our cyvylyte" (74). There is a great deal of this, and the *Dialogue* as a whole is much concerned that the reformed state will have a set of secure bases in law, policy and other institutions as a prerequisite for a growing and flourishing culture. In short, stability is the *sine qua non* of a good or free society.

Clearly, the spontaneity represented by fountains needs the security represented by foundations. Thus, a good education is "the fountayn and the ground" (140) for the making of preachers, and as a commonwealth "stondeth" (46), so it "floryschyth" (46). In one sense, then, freedom operates within constraints, but we cannot easily surrender either the idea of spontaneity or of the limitations which, paradoxically, make freedom possible—in short, we need both the fountains and the foundations.

But there is a further complexity in Starkey's use of these images. As he says, humans have a curious proclivity for turning things "up so downe" (46), and although the fountain springing up fruitfully does indeed suggest freedom, there is also a wellspring of evil or "ruin" about which Starkey is much concerned. On the one hand, God is the "fountayn of al gudnes" (34), and goodness always comes "as out of the fountayn" (109); on the other hand, ignorance is "the fountayn of al yl" (22), and vice springs up also "As out of a fountayn" (21). Sadly, in the "up so downe" world of bad government, fountains look the same as they do anywhere else, even though they bring ruin rather than fruition, chaos rather than growth. And so it is also with foundations, for although there is a "ground of al abundance and plenty" (115), there is also a "ground of al ruyne" (104).

Starkey's answer to how we might distinguish between the fountains of ruin and of fruition initially seems simple—they are known by their results. That is, the first leads to disaster, indicated by Starkey especially through images of blindness and drowning. By contrast, the second leads to a thriving commonwealth where people do not act for selfish ends, but for the good of the community which is marked by strength, beauty and prosperity. Yet such a community is a far cry from what we have to build on at the present moment, and, consequently, we find ourselves relying largely on imagination to depict the better society to which we aspire. Surprisingly, then, Lupset at one point castigates Plato for indulging his imagination in just this way, and for allowing his aspirations to fly too far ahead of what is possible to realise here and now: "wherfor hyt ys reputyd of many men but as a dreme, and vayne imagynatyon whych never can be brought to effect" (18). His interlocutor, Pole, agrees.

The warning is of course quite sensible—we ought not to let our imaginations run away with us. But this caveat presages a remarkably negative attitude to imagination ("fancy") throughout the *Dialogue* as a whole. Thus, "fansy" (8) leads us to ignore the true distinction between virtue and vice; those who refuse to follow civil order are "lyke wyld bestys drawn by folysch fantasy" (35); "frayle fantasy" (35) upsets the rule of reason; "vayn plesurys & folysch fantasye" (58) lead to a dangerous "commyn frenesy" (58). Also, the pursuit of private

gratification that Starkey consistently says leads to the ruin of good societies is at one point explicitly linked to indulgence in fancy (“they pryvate plesure & fantasy” [2]), and the result is that people behave like “wylde bestys” (2). In short, Starkey does not have anything good to say about imagination, but instead depicts it as the main overthrower of reason. In this, he joins the long line of his predecessors, and Plato is their grand progenitor. Yet, as with Plato, we can now quickly point to Starkey’s own imagination as an example of the very thing to which he objects. Although Starkey might well have appreciated that imagination can be deployed both well and badly, he does not choose to praise it, but rather to hold it in suspicion. Thus, there is no sense in his work, nor is there in Plato’s, that imagination is inherently ambivalent, and Starkey, like Plato, does not thematise the trickiness of the relationship in his own work between imagination and ideas.

Nonetheless, as we see in the images of fountains and foundations, Starkey’s figurative language does help him—however unselfconsciously—to express and disclose something of the ambivalence and elusiveness of freedom. Because the society he would reform remains the ground of his own spontaneity, it both enables and confines his free thoughts and actions. The fact is that human beings caught up in history find themselves inevitably standing on insecure foundations of one kind or another, and the spontaneous energies by which reformers would make things new are more confused in this topsy-turvy, “up so downe” world than the reformers themselves think or can easily imagine.

In such a situation, Starkey sought as he could for the elusive dialogical balance between sound ideas and imaginative energy—between foundations and fountains. Not surprisingly, he chose the dialogue form to express his interest in equilibrium, and in the end he produced his own paradoxical brand of aristocratic republicanism. As Bergvall says, he trod an equally tricky path between Ficino and Luther. But whereas Bergvall approaches Starkey’s treatment of freedom through a discussion of ideas, I have considered his use of images. Clearly, a just estimate of the *Dialogue* needs both approaches. Finally, although I am confident that Starkey understood he was using certain images in a patterned way, I am not so sure he saw the implications of his own imaginative practice, or of the ambivalence of imagination, for his theory of a free, reformed

society and how it might emerge from our fractured history. At the end of the day, Starkey's interesting *Dialogue* is less than the great book it might have been had its imaginative reach measured up to its seriousness of purpose.

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NOTE

¹All quotations from Starkey are from T. F. Mayer's edition of *A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset*, Camden fourth series, vol. 37 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1989). Page numbers are cited in the text.