

HOLBEIN'S SIR THOMAS MORE



HILARY MANTEL

XAVIER F. SALOMON



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The Frick Collection, New York
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Now that the sun hath veil'd his light,
And bid the world goodnight;
To the soft bed my body I dispose,
But where shall my soul repose?
—William Fuller, 1688

Ma adesso che viene la sera ed il buio, mi toglie il dolore dagli occhi
E scivola il sole al di là delle dune a violentare altre notti
Io nel vedere quest'uomo che muore, madre io provo dolore
Nella pietà che non cede al rancore, madre ho imparato l'amore
—Fabrizio De André, 1970



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A LETTER TO THOMAS MORE, KNIGHT

Hilary Mantel

My dear More . . . but here's the first problem. How do I address you? Sir Thomas? St. Thomas? Lord Chancellor? I can't just call you Thomas. Half the men in England are called that. Anyway, I don't feel that kind of easy warmth, though one of your modern biographers says that most people who work with you end up liking you. Liking you, disliking you, it shouldn't matter—not to sober historians. But when we see your portrait we respond to you as a man—sad, distinguished, aging, fiercely clever. It gives us a privileged view, as if we are with you in your chapel or writing closet: a way of looking that pierces the fog of misrepresentation, but allows us to see you with respect and in the light of the mercy we all need. Face to face, we can't deny your flawed humanity. And if we admit to yours, why not ours?

Objectivity is impossible. The waters were muddied long since, by early accounts contrived with one eye on fast-track sainthood. When your son-in-law Will Roper wrote your story, it was routine to make a Life into what it ought to have been, and it's notable how some of your opinions firmed up, in the twenty years after your death. Fortunately, we don't have to rely on second-hand reports from another generation. You talk, you write, you sit and look at Hans Holbein: Hans Holbein looks at you.

He sees a vulpine genius. (I like foxes, I mean well.) You are engaged, vital, ready to smile or snap out an impatient remark. Intellect burns through pale indoor skin, like a torch behind a paper screen. Concentration has furrowed your brow, the effort of containing multiple ironies. When you practiced as a lawyer, you used to let your gown trail off one shoulder; admirers copied you, making carelessness a cult. You've not shaved to meet the painter. No time,