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“HEAVEN IS AS NEAR . . .”: THE EVOLUTION OF AN  
ENGLISH PROVERB

**Abstract:** The proverb “We are as near Heaven by sea as by land,” or “The way to Heaven is the same from all places,” or the formula “Heaven is as close to X as to Y” entered the English language toward the end of the fifteenth century. The proverb—or at least the concept expressed by the proverb—has classical roots. It was famously used in the English Renaissance, and its currency persists into modern times.

**Keywords:** Historical proverb study, English proverbs, classical proverbs, medieval proverbs, Renaissance proverbs, modern proverbs, Thomas More, Humphrey Gilbert.

On 9 September 1583, a ship commanded by the famous English explorer Humphrey Gilbert, half-brother to Walter Raleigh, sank in the North Atlantic ocean. According to a witness aboard the nearby *Golden Hind*, Sir Humphrey could be seen “sitting abaft with a booke in his hande” as he cried out “*Wee are as neere to heauen by Sea, as by lande.*”

That anecdote first appeared in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principall Nauigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 1589 (sig. 3Q5<sup>v</sup>), and its retelling in Thomas Fuller’s highly popular *History of the Worthies of England*, 1662, contributed to keeping the anecdote alive: “Instantly a terrible Tempest did arise, and Sir Humphrey said cheerfully to his companions, *We are as neer Heaven here at Sea as at Land.* Nor was it long before his ship sunck into the Sea . . .” (sig. 2M1<sup>r</sup> [first signing]). In 1848, the New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow repeated the anecdote in a memorable stanza of his ballad “Sir Humphrey Gilbert” (which avails itself of the rhyme embedded in Hakluyt’s account):

He sat upon the deck,  
The Book was in his hand;

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“Do not fear! Heaven is as near,”  
He said, “by water as by land.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1942, Winston Churchill, himself a “navy man,” seemed to recall the anecdote (but not the identity of its protagonist); the diary of Charles McMoran Wilson, Churchill’s personal physician, includes this entry for 6 January, as he and the prime minister sat nervously aboard a “flying boat”:

[Churchill:] “Do you realise we are fifteen hundred miles from anywhere?”

[Wilson:] “Heaven is as near by sea as by land,” I reminded him.

[Churchill:] “Who said that?” he asked.

[Wilson:] “I think it was Sir Humphrey Gilbert.”

(Wilson 1966, 25).

Sir Humphrey was speaking a proverb; he needed no book from which to derive the idea, the sentiment, or even the phrasing.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, the book that offered moist courage and comfort to the legendary explorer and his crew could have been Thomas More’s *Utopia*. So surmised the eminent historians Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager in 1942: “that book must have been Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The Utopian ideal for America[,] which was on the mind of every important group of English pioneers from Massachusetts to Georgia, takes off from this *Utopia* . . . .”<sup>3</sup>

In More’s fanciful travel narrative, the mariner and explorer Raphael Hythloday is said to have “two sayings . . . constantly on his lips: ‘He who has no grave is covered by the sky,’ and ‘From all places it is the same distance to heaven’” (“*quippe cui haec assidue sunt in ore, Caelo tegitur qui non habet urnam, & Vndique ad superos tantundem esse uiae*” [More 1965, 50-51]). In the sixteenth-century translation by Ralph Robinson, the second of Hythloday’s sayings is given as “The way to heauen owt of all places is of like length and distance” (More 1551, sig. B4<sup>r</sup>). In the more concise seventeenth-century translation by Gilbert Burnet, Hythloday “often used to say, That the way to Heaven was the same from all places” (More 1684, sig. B7<sup>r</sup>).

A marginal notation printed in the first edition of *Utopia* (Louvain, 1516)—perhaps inserted by More’s close friend, the

great proverb scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam—identifies one or both of those sayings as an “apophthegma” (More 1965, 281-82). Like Erasmus himself, whose magisterial *Adagia* gave rebirth to such a multitude of classical proverbs, More was probably recovering or adapting an ancient saying, versions of which can be found in both Greek and Latin—though the saying may already have been current as a proverb in English and other modern languages. The Yale edition’s commentary on *Utopia* aptly cites as a prototype of the “apophthegm” a passage from Cicero (c44 B.C.): “It was a noble saying of Anaxagoras on his deathbed at Lampsacus, in answer to his friends’ inquiry whether he wished in the event of need to be taken away to Clazomenae, his native land: ‘There is no necessity,’ said he, ‘for from any place the road to the lower world is just as far’” (“*undique enim ad inferos tantundem viae est*” [Cicero 1927, 124-25]). As the Yale annotators remark, More has (so to speak) Christianized the expression in Cicero, substituting “*ad superos*” for the pagan “*ad inferos*”—the road “to heaven” for the road “to the underworld.”

Ordinarily, of course, a single Ciceronian “source” would be insufficient to mark a sentence as a proverb.<sup>4</sup> Erasmus—and presumably More as well—would have been aware of other ancient texts standing behind Hythloday’s cherished utterance. Indeed, one defining mark of proverbiality can be the tendency for an expression to get attached to various personas in differing situations. In the third century A.D., the saying still belonged to Anaxagoras (who lived in the fifth century B.C.). But whereas Cicero presented Anaxagoras speaking of himself, Diogenes Laertius in his Greek *Lives of the Philosophers* has the ancient sage applying his proto-stoic perception to somebody else’s case: “To one who complained that he was dying in a foreign land, his answer was, ‘The descent to Hades is much the same from whatever place we start’” (Diogenes Laertius 1925, 1:140-41). Perhaps it is worth noting that the un-“Christianized” version of the saying that Erasmus in his *Apophthegmata* (1531) attributed to Anaxagoras seems at least as close to the utterance of Diogenes Laertius’s Anaxagoras as to that of Cicero’s: “*Bono animo es, inquit, idem enim undelibet ad inferos descensus est*” (Erasmus 1703, col. 331).”

An epigram ascribed to Leonidas of Tarentum, from the third century B.C.—one not included in common versions of the *Greek Anthology*—had anticipated the general idea:

Push on, push on, with manful cheer, and tread  
 The path to Death: it is not hard to go,  
 Not rough and zigzag, nor bewildering  
 With tricks and turns, but straight as straight can be  
 And downhill all the way, and travelers  
 Err not therein who walk it with shut eyes.  
 (Leonidas 1931, 12-13)

The point about eyesight being no requisite to finding one's way to the next world also appears in Diogenes Laertius, reporting a bon mot from Bion of Borysthenes (3rd century B.C.): "The road to Hades, he used to say, was easy to travel; at any rate men passed away with their eyes shut" (Diogenes Laertius 1925, 1:426-27). Perhaps the saying from one of those Greek sources is what the Welsh epigrammatist John Owen, in 1612, grafted onto the "broad highway" to destruction mentioned in St. Matthew's gospel (7:13):

*Via lata.*

*Lata via est, et trita via est, quae ducit ad Orcum.  
 Invenit hoc, etiam se duce, caecus iter.*  
 (Owen 1976-78, 2:98)

As translated (awkwardly) by Thomas Harvey in 1677:

Broad is the way, much trod, unt' Hell that leads;  
 The Blind, himself the Guide, this broad way treads.  
 (Owen 1677, sig. H3<sup>v</sup>)

An anonymous epigram in the *Greek Anthology* (10.3)—probably written as an epitaph—centers on a similar conceit:

The way down to Hades is straight, whether you start  
 from Athens or whether you betake yourself there, when  
 dead, from Meroe. Let it not vex thee to die far from thy  
 country. One fair wind to Hades blows from all lands.  
 (Paton 1916-18, 4:4-5)

The idea can be found in Virgil, when the Sibyl advises Aeneas concerning his intended journey to the underworld:

*facilis descensus Averno;  
 noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;  
 sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,*

*hoc opus, hic labor est.* (6.126-29)

The descent to the underworld is not arduous; night and day the halls of Pluto are easily accessible; but to retrace the steps and come back up to the open air—*this* would be an effort indeed[!]

(Virgil 1916, 1:540-41)

In the Greek epigrams and the lines from the *Aeneid*, it is the uniform ease of the journey, rather than the equality in distance from all points, that receives the emphasis. We might note that Burnet’s 1684 translation of *Utopia* (unlike Robinson’s of 1551) lends itself to non-spatial understandings of the “way”: Burnet’s Hythloday was fond of noting that “the way to Heaven was the same from all places” (More 1684, sig. B7<sup>r</sup>).

Something of the same idea—though not especially analogous in its expression—occurs in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. When Augustine’s mother, Monica, was asked if she fears to die far from her home, she replied, “Nothing is far from God; nor is it to be feared lest he should not know[,] at the end of the world, the place whence he is to raise me up” (“*nihil inquit ‘longe est deo, neque timendum est, ne ille non agnoscat in fine saeculi, unde me resuscitet’*” [Augustine 1912, 2:56-57]).

In the fifteenth century, a book that Thomas More would almost certainly have known attributes to Pythagoras (sixth century B.C.) the saying elsewhere credited to Anaxagoras and to Raphael Hythloday. Possibly the first book ever printed in England, *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophers* (Westminster: Caxton, 1477) was a translation from the French by Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers—the printer William Caxton’s patron and a grand courtier whom More had emblazoned in his *History of King Richard III* as “brother vnto the Quene, a right honourable man, as valiaunte of hande as politike in counsaile.”<sup>5</sup> Of Pythagoras, Woodville’s English says, “It fortunéd his wyf was decessed in a ferre cowntre / and some axed him If there were eny difference to dye in their propre lande orellis ferre from theirs / He ansuerd / whersomeuer one dye / the wey to the other worlde is all like” (fol. [20]<sup>r</sup>). Woodville’s Pythagoras remains noncommittal as to whether the other world is up or down!

The omnipresence of God is, to be sure, a Christian commonplace. The more specific conceit of the equidistance of

heaven, as a place, from all points on earth has been expressed in modern times not only in the English proverb but also in Icelandic, Danish, Norwegian, and German analogs. A German form, attested from the nineteenth century, is “*Der Himmel ist uns überall gleich nahe*” (Düringsfeld and Reinsberg-Düringsfeld 1872-75, 1:384; Wander 1867-80, 2:647). Not previously noted, I believe, is an occurrence in a work by Martin Luther from 1525. Luther put the expression into the mouth of Henry of Zütphen, a Netherlandish priest who had been martyred the previous year en route to visit Luther in Wittenburg: “*der hymel were da also nahe als anderswo*” (Luther 1908, 235). Luther, of course, was the contemporary (and bitter enemy) of Thomas More.

In 1577, Timothy Kendall’s *Flowers of Epigrammes*, in a section with the heading “Out of Greek Epigrams,” included this poem, titled “It matters not where a man dye”:

IT makes no matter where thou die:  
 the waie to heauen on hie  
 From euery countrey is a like,  
 be it farre of[f], or nie.

(sig I4<sup>r</sup>, missigned “H4”)

If those lines are intended as an Englishing of one of the Greek epigrams referred to above, they translate very freely indeed. Kendall’s poem more nearly resembles simply a versifying of our proverb itself.

In 1583, the same year that Humphrey Gilbert sank, the English theologian John Prime may have had the proverb in mind when he declared, “. . . faith alone in sauing doeth the deede, and not workes. For the way to heauen is but single, and one & the same to all” (Prime 1583, sig. H5<sup>v</sup>). Here the *way*, which has been referred to more-or-less concretely in other versions of the saying, becomes abstract and non-spatial, signifying ‘means’ rather than ‘road’ or ‘route’.

In 1621, Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* expressed the point thus: “Banishment is no grievance at all . . . . All places are distant from heaven alike, the Sunne shines happily as warme in one citty as in another, and to a wise man there is no difference of climes” (Burton 1989-2000, 2:174-75). In the anonymous *Tragedy of Nero*, 1624, the noble Cornutus consoles himself in the face of exile from Rome:

The farther, still, I goe from hence, I know,  
 The farther I leaue Shame and Vice behind.  
 Where can I goe, but I shall see thee, *Sunne?*  
 And Heauen will be as neere me, still, as here.  
 (act 2; sig. C4<sup>r</sup>)

The character Cornutus, it is clear, shares Raphael Hythloday’s low opinion of courtiers and potentates! In a shortened and badly-printed edition of the play in 1676, now titled *Piso’s Conspiracy*, the third (quoted) line reads, “Where can I go, but I shall see the Sun?” Like Burton, it may be observed, the playwright (in either version) has coupled the proverb with a reverential reference to the ubiquitous radiance of the sun—an idea slightly reminiscent of Raphael Hythloday’s other favorite expression, “He who has no grave is covered by the sky.” (In fact, mention of the sun in connection with our proverb has been somewhat common; for instance, in 1790 a pastor, John Newton, wrote to “a lady” to reassure her: “The same sun shines at London, Bedford, and Hernhuth. And the way to heaven is equally open and near from every place” [Newton 1817, 833]).

In 1630, Robert Willan’s published sermon *Elijah’s Wish / A Prayer for Death* implied an attribution to St. John Chrysostom:

*Elias* was persecuted by *Iezabell* a Queene, *Chrysostome* by *Eudoxis* an Emperesse, both threatened with death: The holy Father taking it into his meditations writing to his friend, thus hee Resolues, What if an angry Emperesse banish mee my natiue soile and sweete country? all the earth is the Lords, and I shall be as neare to heauen anywhere, as at *Constantinople*: what if I bee throwne into the sea? *Ionah* prayed in the whales belly . . . (sig. C2<sup>v</sup>)

The words “and I shall be as neare to heauen anywhere, as at *Constantinople*” are Preacher Willan’s proverbial insertion into what is otherwise a translation from Chrysostom’s letter to Bishop Cyriacus (possibly on the basis of Willan’s false attribution—or a common source—a few later writers have credited the proverb itself to Chrysostom).

In *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Capt. Thomas James, in His Intended Discouery of the Northwest Passage into the South Sea*, 1633, Captain James perhaps remembered the

words of his predecessor among seamen and explorers, Humphrey Gilbert, when, on 30 November 1631, James addressed his ship's crew, icebound for the winter in Hudson Bay: "I comforted them the best I could with such like words: . . . If it be our fortunes to end our dayes here, we are as neere heauen, as in *England*; and we are much bound to God Almighty for giuing vs so large a time of repentance . . ." (sig. G4<sup>r</sup>).

The English Quaker and American colonist William Penn in 1682 attributed the apothegm to a different ancient figure from the ones cited by other writers. The second part of *No Cross, No Crown*—"Containing an Account of the Living and Dying Sayings of Men Eminent for their Greatness, Learning, or Virtue"—gives it among the sayings of Diogenes the Cynic (fourth century B.C.): "To one bewailing himself, that he should not dye in his own Country: *Be of Comfort*, saith he, *for the Way to Heaven is alike in every Place.*"<sup>6</sup> Penn was Oxford educated; conceivably he derived the attribution from a classical source. Or, considering the affinities between the texts, he may simply have confused the cynical philosopher Diogenes with the historian Diogenes Laertius, whose Anaxagoras plays precisely the same role as Penn's Diogenes. Or perhaps Penn carelessly read (or carelessly remembered) Cicero, who recounted the Anaxagoras incident just after quoting some sayings of Diogenes the Cynic.

In its 1693 edition, an edifying "self help" book titled *Humane Prudence, or the Art by Which a Man May Raise Himself and Fortune to Grandeur*—sometimes credited to one William de Britaine (a pseudonym?)—contained these helpful words (added to what is called the "sixth edition"): "I am prepared against all Misfortunes and Infelicities . . . : Must I be poor? I shall have Company: Must I be banished? Ile think my self born there; and the way to Heaven is alike in all Places" (139-40).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's notebooks from the 1840s show that New Englander drafting several versions of some lines that were to include the proverb; they were never published:

Be of your country & house & skin  
 Though you reap nothing but your chin  
 Tho you farm your body & sweat  
 For the morsel that you eat  
 Ax or scythe or mallet wield



Cedar swamp or cranberry field  
 Stone, or ice, or fisher’s flakes  
 Or a shoe your labor makes  
 Get your rent & stipend there  
 Way to heaven is just as near  
 From every cabin in the sphere.

(Emerson 1986, 256-57)

To return, specifically, to the *water/land* version of the saying, purportedly on the lips of the subsiding Humphrey Gilbert in 1583: The English Catholic Nicholas Harpsfield (1519-1575), in a manuscript eventually published as *A Treatise on the Pretended Divorce between Henry VIII. and Catharine of Aragon*, told of an encounter between King Henry’s Protestant henchmen and the noncompliant Franciscans William Peto and Henry Elston (commonly miswritten as “Elstow”), in 1533:

[A]fter many rebukes and threats a nobleman told them that they deserved to be thrust into a sack, and to be thrown and drowned in the Thames; whereat Friar Elstowe smiling, “Make these threats” (saith he) “to the courtiers, for as for us we make little accompt, knowing right well that the way lieth as open to heaven by water as by land.”

(Harpsfield 1878, 204-05)

The 1615 edition of John Stow’s *Annals* embellished the anecdote:

[A]nd when the Lords hadde rebuked them, then the Earle of *Essex* tolde them, that they had deserued to be put into a Sacke & cast into the Thames, whereunto *Elstow* smyling sayd[,] threaten these things to rich and dayntie folke, which are clothed in purple, fare deliciously and haue their chiefest hope in this world, for wee esteeme them not . . . and with thanks to God wee know the way to heauen, to be as ready by water as by land, and therefore we care not which way we goe.

(Stow 1615, sig. 3A4<sup>v</sup>)

It seems that Friar Elston may actually have been ironically playing on the *water/land* dichotomy in what must already have been a familiar version of the proverb. Certainly to be “put into a Sacke & cast into the Thames” is an uncommon and vividly grotesque notion

of death by water—and one that does not involve any significant *spatial* distance from death by ax, rope, or pyre on the river's shore. So an ordinary, non-ironic interpretation is precluded.

In 1567—35 years after the prospective martyrdom by drowning of Friar Elston and 16 years before Humphrey Gilbert's watery death—George Turburville published an English epigram titled “Epitaph of Maister Win drowned in the Sea” (the identity of Mr. Win is unknown):

But since his fate allotted him to fall  
Amid the sowsing seas and troublous tide,  
Let not his death his faithful friends appall [,]  
For he is not the first that so hath died,  
Nor shall be seen the last: As nigh a way  
To Heaven by waters as by land[,] they say.<sup>7</sup>

That final phrase, “they say,” clearly indicates that the proverb in its *water/land* form, which Friar Elston's remark had ironically adapted in 1533 (if we are to credit the reports), was well fixed in the 1560s.

In the year 1600, a blank-verse meditation “Of Heaven,” by John Bodenham, piously rhapsodized:

All powers are subiect to the power of Heauen.  
Nothing but Heauen, is perfect happinesse.  
What Heauen will haue, that needs must come to passe.  
The Soule is heauenly, and from heauen relieu'd.  
Heauen is as neare to sea, as to the land.  
(Bodenham 1600, sig B3<sup>v</sup>)

The very irrelevancy of the last line, in context, may somehow indicate the proverbiality of its wording; the reader is expected to *know* the saying as it can function traditionally.

The *water/land* form of the proverb, however, seems not to have been especially prevalent after the seventeenth century—except in specific reference to the death of Sir Humphrey Gilbert. In the late nineteenth century, some maudlin verses titled “The Captain's Daughter, or The Ballad of the Tempest,” by the New England writer James T. Fields, included these stanzas:

As thus we sat in darkness,  
Each one busy in his prayers,—

“We are lost!” the captain shouted,  
As he staggered down the stairs.

But his little daughter whispered  
As she took his icy hand,

“Is not God upon the ocean,—  
Just the same as on the land?”

(Fields 1881, 63-64)

There is no indication that a reader is expected to recognize the daughter’s precociously pious words as proverbial, and the *ocean/land* dichotomy here refers simply to the omnipresence of God—not to the equidistance of water and land from the next world.

Likewise, an undated epitaph inscribed on a gravestone in Westmoreland, England:

Underneath this humble stone  
Sleeps a skull of name unknown  
Deep in Eden’s bed ’twas found  
Was the luckless owner drowned?  
What matter since we all must die  
Whether death be wet or dry?

(Spiegl 1973, fols. 23<sup>v</sup>-24<sup>r</sup>)

Although the *water/land* version of the proverb faded in its popularity, other dichotomies have occurred abundantly—in contrast to versions (in several languages) which note simply that heaven, or the underworld, is equally near to everywhere on earth.

Just a decade after Luther used the proverb (if it already was a proverb in German) in connection with the death of the Reformer priest Henry of Zütphen, and one year after the reported statement by Friar Elston under threat of death for his adherence to the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas More began his own road to martyrdom, entering prison in 1534. Dame Alice chided her husband for what seemed to her like his willful perversity and stubbornness. As recounted by More’s son-in-law William Roper, Alice visited her confined husband and berated him:

“I mervaille that you, that have bine alwaies hitherto taken for so wise a man, will nowe so play the foole to lye here in this close, filthy prison, and be content thus to be shut

vpp amongst mise and rattes, when you might be abroade at your libertye, and with the favour and good will both of the kinge and his Councell, If yow wold but doe as all the Byshops and best learned of this realme haue done. And seinge you have at Chelsey a right faire house, your library, your bookes, your gallery, your garden, your orchard, and all other necessaries so handsome aboute you, where you might in the company of me your wife, your children, and howshold be meerye, I muse what a gods name you meane heare still thus fondly to tarye.”

After he had a while quietly heard her, with a chearefull countenance he said vnto her:

“I pray thee, good mistris Alice, tell me one thinge.”

“What is that?” quoth shee.

“Is not this house,” quoth he, “as nighe heauen as my owne?”<sup>8</sup>

There, More was neatly echoing in English the proverb he had assigned, in Latin, to his fictional character Raphael Hythloday a decade earlier, in *Utopia*: “From all places it is the same distance to heaven.” Now, however, we have a formula: “Heaven is as near to X as to Y,” in this case, as near to a dank and dingy cell in the Tower of London as to More’s own idyllic home in Chelsea. Into the formula, as it became traditional, a traveler might consolingly insert the names or identities of almost any two places—especially a familiar, comfortable locale counterpoised with a remote, exotic, or dangerous one.

An early version of the formulaic saying was attributed to Eleanor of Castile, a romantic favorite of late-medieval legend, although the anecdote first appeared in print in John Camden’s *Remains Concerning Britaine*, 1605:

*Eleanor* wife to king *Edward* the first, a most vertuous and wise woman, when hee tooke his long and dangerous voyage into the holy land, would not be dissuaded to tarrye at home, but woulde needes accompany him, saying; “Nothing must part them whome God hath joyned, and the way to heaven is as neare in the holy land, (if not nearer) as in England or Spaine.

(Camden 1984, 237)

Prince Edward departed on his crusade in 1270, and the devoted Eleanor went along. Camden’s source for the quoted incident has not been discovered; almost certainly he did not invent it, since he included it in his section “Grave Speeches, and wittie Apothegmes of worthie Personages of this Realme in former times.” Whatever the source, scholarly or popular, More might have encountered it as well as Camden.

Still earlier, in the late fourth century A.D., St. Jerome counseled his far-away friend Paulinus, “*Et de Jerosolymis et de Britannia æqualiter patet aula cœlestis*” (Jerome 1845, col. 581). In a sermon preached in 1630, the great poet and divine John Donne translated: “Heaven is as neare England, (saies S. *Hierom*) as it is to Jerusalem” (*England* anachronistically translating *Britannia* [Donne 1953-62, 9:210]). Jerome was also cited, following an innovative version of the proverb, by the Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta in his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 1590; as translated by one “E. G.” in 1604 (in reference to the “many Spaniards, who beeing here [in the ‘West Indies’] sigh for *Spaine*”): “to whom we answere, that the desire to returne to *Spaine*, doth nothing trouble vs, being as neere vnto Heaven at *Peru*, as in *Spaine*”; for, as St. Jerome said, “the gates of Heaven are as neere vnto *Brittanie*, as to *Ierusalem*” (Acosta 1604, sig. C1<sup>v</sup>).

In the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, *ad hoc* versions of the formulaic proverb have abounded, especially in letters, diaries, articles, and fiction concerning missionaries, soldiers, emigrants, and other earthly sojourners: Generically, heaven is as near “the great city” as “the breezy down”; “a cottage” as “a palace.” Demographically, it is as near “the poor” as “the rich.” Geographically, heaven is as near “Russia” as “England”; “St. Helena” as “England”; “Basutoland” as “England”; “Ireland” as “England”; “America” as “England”; “London” as “York”; “Cairo” as “London”; “Italy” as “America”; “China” as “America”; “the Western Territories” as “New York”; “Constantinople” as “Hartford”; “Port-au-Prince” as “Washington”; “Rancho El Grande” as “Stony Hill Farm”; “Kentucky” as “our childhood home” in Australia; “Kansas” as “any other country.”

Nor has the formulaic saying, in modern times, applied exclusively to Christian concerns. In 1855 an unsigned editorial

titled “The American Jew” appeared in the San Francisco *Sun*; presumably, it glances skeptically at a custom widely known (if not so widely practiced) by post-diaspora Jews, the placement in a burial site of a small amount of earth or a few pebbles from Jerusalem (Robinson 2001, 188):

The American Jew is only less proud of his country than of his religion. To say that he is a mere dweller upon the soil, because it affords him the means of support, is to libel the most noble traits of his character. The graves of his ancestors are around him. His heaven is as near to him on the golden shores of the Pacific, as upon the sacred Mount of Olives or within the classic walls of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the proverb (in one or more of its forms) was so well-known that quoting just a fragment of it could be sufficient to allude to the entire expression or concept. A young man prepares to move to Minnesota; in response to apprehensive dissuasions, he remarks, “It is a long way off, but that makes little difference. ‘Heaven is as near’ you know; though I have every intention of living, if I can” (Wheaton 1878, 67).

To summarize, as regards early occurrences of the proverb in English—in its various forms: I assume that Eleanor of Castile, in the thirteenth century, if she actually uttered the proverb—as, in 1605, she was reported to have—would not have spoken it in English. Otherwise, of the instances I have located, the earliest in English was Pythagoras’s saying as translated by Anthony Woodville in the late fifteenth century. The second-earliest appearing in English was Friar Elston’s pronouncement in 1532—if he really said it—as recounted in the middle third of the sixteenth century. Next was Thomas More’s reported riposte to Dame Alice in the Tower of London in 1534. Next would be Ralph Robinson’s 1551 translation of *Utopia*; then George Turburville’s epigram in 1567; then Timothy Kendall’s epigram of 1577; then Humphrey Gilbert’s vocal immersion of 1583, and John Prime’s use of the proverb that same year to justify justification-by-faith-alone; then John Bodenham’s meditation “Of Heaven” in 1600.

Of course, if we can assume that Thomas More was thinking in English when he wrote *Utopia* in 1515 or 1516, then that oc-

currence attains an early position in the ranking. In the context of More’s fictional narrative, a jesting implication may be that Heaven is not a “place” at all—just as *U-topia* itself is ‘no-place.’

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Poems and Other Writings*, edited by J. D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2000), 130. Longfellow obviously knew *Utopia*, from which he quoted, without attribution, in his little essay “Where Is Peter Grimm?”: “The grave tells no tales. He was huddled into it like a malefactor, a handful of earth thrown over him—no tears shed, no bell tolled, no dirge sung. After all, what matter it where or how? ‘The way to heaven is the same from all places, and he that has no grave has the heavens still over him’”; *Prose Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886), 1:501-02. Longfellow was quoting (or slightly misquoting) from Bishop Burnet’s translation (More 1684, sig. B7’).

<sup>2</sup> Identified, in some form, as a proverb and illustrated (skimpily) by M. P. Tilley, *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1950), W171; F. P. Wilson, *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 872; and B. J. Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP), W75. A related proverb, “The descent to hell (Avernus) is easy,” appears in Tilley (D205); Wilson (177); and Whiting’s *Modern Proverbs* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1989; D114).

<sup>3</sup> *The Growth of the American Republic*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford UP, 1942), 1:35; the first two editions do not contain the quoted matter. Some years later, Morison rhapsodically elaborated: “The book that Sir Humphrey was reading on the last day of his life was undoubtedly Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* . . . . That book, which has given its name to all other utopias, may be called the blueprint to the American dream of a good life . . . . He [More] foretold that a model republic might be founded somewhere in the new countries recently discovered; and that there mankind might find what they had always sought—plenty, peace, liberty, and security, under a government of calm philosophers . . .” (*Oxford History of the American People* [New York: Oxford UP, 1965], 44).

<sup>4</sup> The most extensive treatment of More’s proverb lore, John Cavanaugh’s unpublished doctoral thesis “The Use of Proverbs and Sententiae for Rhetorical Amplification in the Writings of Saint Thomas More” (Saint Louis University, 1969), adds no information to the Yale edition’s note on this point. The probability that Cicero was one of More’s definite “sources” is bolstered not only by the closeness of the verbal echo but also by the fact that Peter Giles, the narrator, has just remarked on Hythloday’s contempt for all Roman authors except Seneca and Cicero. (However, the other saying constantly on Hythloday’s lips comes from the Roman Lucan. Irony?) Given the geocentric notion of the cosmos, the statement that heaven is the same distance from every point on earth would have had a kind of literal accuracy, since everything beyond the outer planetary sphere is *Coelum empireum habitaculum Dei et omnium electorum* (as it is labeled in a famous engraving from Peter

Apian's *Cosmographia*, 1524). On the other hand, as Walter Gordon has pointed out, the presence of God is not to be understood in spatial terms; "Time, Space, and the Eucharist," *Downside Review* 95 (1977): 110-16.

<sup>5</sup> Edited by Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1963), 14. *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophers* had a complicated ancestry. The eleventh-century Syrian Mubashshir ibn Fatik compiled *Mukhtar al-Hikam*, which was translated into Spanish as *Bocados de oro* ('Golden Mouthfuls'). In the thirteenth century Johannes de Procida translated the Spanish into Latin—from which, about the year 1400, Guillaume de Tignonville made the French translation that Woodville possessed.

<sup>6</sup> *No Cross, No Crown / A Discourse Showing the Nature and Discipline of the Holy Cross of Christ . . . : To Which Are Added the Living and Dying Testimonies of Divers Persons of Fame and Learning in Favour of This Treatise* (London: Printed and sold by Benjamin Clark, 1682), sig. Y1<sup>r</sup>. This is one of several editions (from different printers) that call themselves the "second"—all dated 1682. It corresponds to P1330 in Donald Wing's *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England . . . , 1641-1700*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1972-88). The title, of course, quotes a proverb.

<sup>7</sup> *Epitaphes, Epigrams, Songs and Sonetes* ([London,] 1567), fol. 129<sup>r</sup> (the second epigram in the book that bears the title "Epitaph of Maister Win drowned in the Sea"). Conceivably, the *water/land* versions of the proverb represent (on some level) a stoic response to Aristotle's insistence that death by water can occasion no genuine courage: "[W]e do not call a man courageous for facing death by drowning or disease . . . . Not that the courageous man is not also fearless in a storm at sea (as also in illness), though not in the same way as sailors are fearless, for he thinks there is no hope of safety, and to die by drowning is revolting to him, whereas sailors keep up heart because of their experience. Also courage is shown in dangers where a man can defend himself by valour or die nobly, but neither is possible in disasters like shipwreck" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.6.7-12, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann, 1934], 156-57). Presumably Aristotle here was countering Plato, who in *Laches* had Socrates assert that courage can be displayed not only on the battlefield but also in the face of peril by sea, sickness, poverty, or political turmoil. Toward the end of his life, Thomas More might have found sustenance in that Socratic conception of quiet and lonely courage—the "better fortitude of patience and heroic martyrdom" (in the words of *Paradise Lost*).

<sup>8</sup> *Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knighte*, edited by Elsie V. Hitchcock, E.E.T.S., no. 97 (London: Oxford UP, 1935), 82-83. The anecdote was repeated, with little variation from Roper's wording, by More's other early biographers: Nicholas Harpsfield, *Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight*, edited by Hitchcock, E.E.T.S., no. 186 (London: Oxford UP, 1932) 95-96; Ro: Ba., *Life of Syr Thomas More, Somtymes Lord Chancellour of England*, edited by Hitchcock and P. E. Hallet, E.E.T.S., no. 222 (London: Oxford UP, 1950), 134-35; Cresacre More, *Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore Lord High Chancellour of England* (Douai, 1631), sig. 2Q2<sup>r</sup>.



<sup>9</sup> Reprinted in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 45 (1955-56): 268-70.

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