

THE SHAPE OF UTOPIA

STUDIES IN A LITERARY GENRE



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Preface (1970)

Just as in utopia it is easier to specify what has been avoided than what has been achieved, so it is easier to say what this book is not than what it is. It is not a history of utopias. Although the essays herein take into account most of the best-known literary utopias, including negative ones, and some fairly obscure examples of the kind, there is no attempt whatever at historical coverage. Ideology is not the central concern here either, although any study of a genre so imbedded in social and political issues must have its own ideological biases. I have not tried to conceal my own deep ambivalence about utopian modes of thought.

The essays that follow are of two kinds: interpretive studies of individual literary utopias and genre studies of the utopian mode itself. They are connected by certain thematic interests that run through the book. One of the themes is structural and, I suppose, functional; it has to do with the relation of utopian literature to satire: the use of utopia as a strategy of satire, the distribution of positive and negative elements in the two genres. Gonzalo's utopian speech in *The Tempest* reflects the theme in part:

*I' the commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none ...
All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.*

If this has more of a Golden Age than a utopian flavor about it, still Gonzalo expresses the characteristic negative emphasis of the literature which issues from man's fantasies about what life on earth could be like.

A second theme, which is moral and political, may be summed up in the Latin phrase *corruptio optimi pessima*: the corruption of the best becomes the worst; or, as Shakespeare puts the same sentiment,

*sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*

The theme has shadowed utopia from the beginning. It has particular significance for our day because of its importance in feeding the flood of negative utopias that in the last forty or fifty years has swept away most of our dreams of a better world.

Generous and large-spirited as many of those dreams were, some were foolish and some dangerous. Although the uninhibited utopianizing imagination which produced them is alive again in certain areas of our culture (among the hippies, for example), as a motivating force for major social change it has for good reason nearly disappeared. Our history has made confident visions of the wholesale reconstitution of society, like those of the nineteenth century, impossible. Significantly, the New Left refuses to spell out details of the society it hopes to establish. On the other hand, without an image of the good life to guide him man loses his will to invent and shape the future; as Mannheim says, he becomes a thing. Our writers, no longer able to construct blueprints of the desirable life of the future, may find that necessity adds glamour to more modest goals. Kenneth Boulding welcomes the historical period on which we have entered—post-civilization, he calls it—because it offers the possibility that slavery, poverty, exploitation, gross inequality, war, and disease—“these prime costs of civilization”—will fall to the vanishing point. We still have the chance to make the transition to this “modest utopia,” says Boulding—a chance which is probably not repeatable in this part of the universe. Late as it is, there is still meat here for the literary imagination.

A word on terminology: *utopia* is notoriously a tricky term as, given its birth in ambiguity, it must be. The word has broad and restricted meanings,

positive and pejorative ones. Except that I write Utopia with a capital to indicate a place, I can make no claim to consistency of usage, relying instead on context to make clear the sense intended for the term and its derivatives at any given point.

The first, second, and fifth essays of this book appeared, in different form, in *Yale Review*, *ELH*, and *Centennial Review*, respectively. The first and the fifth essays appeared in German translation in *Antaios*. The sixth essay appeared in Italian translation in the issue of *Strumenti Critici* devoted to American criticism (June 1969). The fourth essay was written originally for *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*. Editors of these publications have kindly given me permission to use the essays here. The third essay was presented in different form as a paper at the Second International Congress on the Enlightenment, held at St. Andrews University, Scotland, in August 1967.

I am glad to be able to thank publicly the people and the institutions who have helped me in the preparation of this book. In critical and creative ways my graduate students made me learn as I tried to teach. I have worked at the Widener Library at Harvard, the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and the libraries at Ohio State University and the University of California, San Diego. My work has been supported by the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. These are utopian institutions every one, and I am most grateful for their indispensable aid. Although it would not be entirely accurate to speak of either Ohio State University or the University of California as utopian, I am equally grateful for the research grants and the support of various kinds they generously provided. Jan Altizer has been a most able editorial assistant. Several of my friends have read part or all of this work at one stage or another of its development: Morton W. Bloomfield, Leicester Bradner, Sigurd Burckhardt, Robert M. Estrich, Richard Falk, Sydney Harth, Kurt H. Wolff, Andrew Wright, and particularly Roy Harvey Pearce. I thank them all for their criticisms and suggestions—for their interest. Much more than thanks for Mary, who does not believe in utopia.