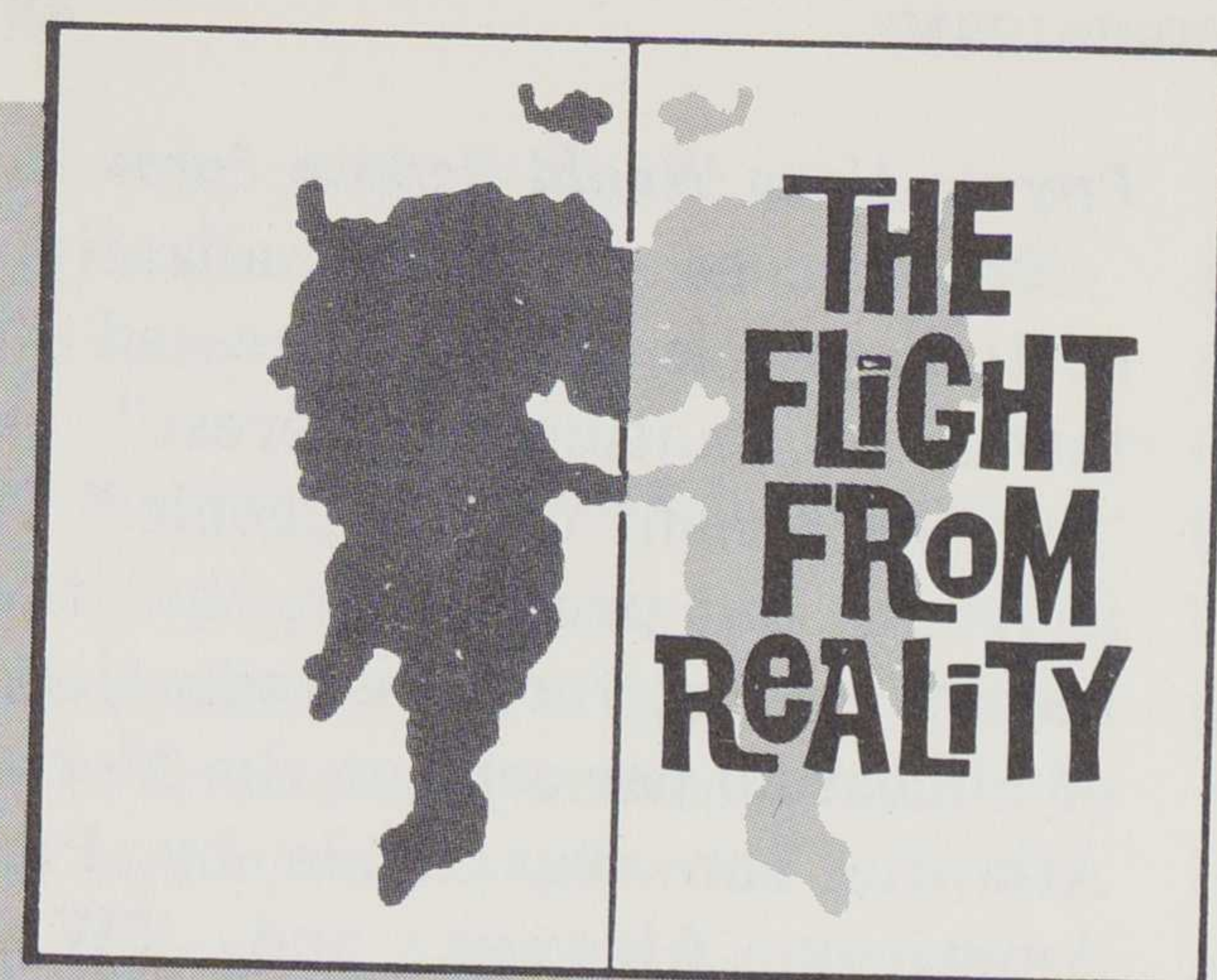




5. *The Utopian Vision*

CLARENCE B. CARSON

... I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any, misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased an hundredfold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment, except ignorance, to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal.¹

—ROBERT OWEN, 1816

THE CONNECTION between visions of utopia and reformers may not be apparent to everyone. Utopians are often thought of as quaint characters who lived and wrote sometime in the past, somewhat impractical but harmless fellows. If they were literary figures in their own right, or if they had a pleasing style, excerpts from their works crop up in anthologies of literature, and whole books are sometimes reprinted. But they are not generally credited with

¹ Quoted in W. H. G. Armitage, *Heavens Below* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 77.

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having had much to do with what has happened. The matter is quite otherwise, in fact.

Hardly a reform proposal has been made in the twentieth century which did not have antecedents in utopian literature of the nineteenth century or earlier. As one writer points out, in the earlier period "utopists were anticipating the 'welfare state,' the nationalization of industries, 'socialized' medicine and health programs, unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and numerous other such proposals. . . ."²

More specifically, one historian points out that Robert Owen, an

² Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick, *The Quest for Utopia* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), p. 16.

early nineteenth century utopian, had a considerable impact upon historical development. "Owen . . . was influential in bringing to pass the first labor legislation, the British Factory Acts in 1819. . . . The co-operative buying societies among the poorer folk. . . are also the direct outgrowth of Owen's experiments of New Lanark. He was one of the pioneers of the trade union movement, and laid down the first plans for labor bureaus on the national scale."³ This writer goes on to give similar examples for many other utopians.

Utopias are articulated visions of a perfect society. They are products of the imagination of their authors, neither existing anywhere at the time they are described nor ever having existed anywhere. They are futuristic in orientation, though there is often an admixture of a return to felicity which man once enjoyed before corruption. Even so, their realization is to come at some future time, or at least that is the implication and hope. Even so, the "role of utopias in social thought . . . is not analogous to that of blueprint to house. Such a misconception makes them of little importance, for as such they have hardly entered the stream of hu-

³ Joyce O. Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 282.

man history at all. Instead, utopias more nearly play the part of the idealized picture of the completed house which precedes the drawing of the blueprint. Utopias are the best societies which their authors can imagine, distant goals toward which their creators would have us move, unhampered in their conception by gross obstacles and difficulties."⁴

The Vision and the Means

The construction of a utopia, then, is an elemental flight from reality. The author who does so must, by the nature of his task, withdraw from concrete reality, must envision something which does not exist. Insofar as he neglects to take into account the nature of man and the universe, as most modern utopians have, he is engaged in a full-fledged flight from reality. The role of utopian thought in the development of meliorist reform is this: Utopians provided the vision of the perfect society toward which meliorist reform is supposed to move. Quite often, they also described the means which might be used to achieve utopia and ways of doing things in the perfect society. Utopia is the end; meliorist reform is the means. Utopias have served as

⁴ Clarence B. Carson, "Their Young Men Dream No Dreams," *Spiritual Life*, IX (Spring 1963), 32.