

Norman Cohn

# The Ranters

## The "Underground" in the England of 1650

EVEN BY the gaudy standard of California it was a grotesquely memorable crime. And the most fascinating element of it was Charles Manson himself, a silken-voiced nouveau guru with an Old Testament beard, the eyes of Rasputin and a line of mystic patter that mixed the Beatles with scientology. . . . His "Family" turned on with marijuana and LSD regularly. On top of that Manson piled a baffling but effective mix of Beatles lyrics and mysticism, explaining to his flock—with chilling prescience—that the Beatles' "Revolution 9" really was a reference to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 9, Verse 21: "Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts. . . ."

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THROUGHOUT the later Middle Ages western Europe contained a substantial body of religious dissenters. Most of the forms of dissent, or heresy, have been fully explored, but one remains mysterious. From the thirteenth century onwards there are countless references, in ecclesiastical writings of all sorts, to heretical mystics who believed that they were so wholly united with God that they were incapable of sinning. Some of these people were said to draw the conclusion that all things were permitted to them—sexual promiscuity above all, but also lying, stealing, even murder. It was also said that some of them denounced private property,

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on the grounds that God had created all things to be held in common. Labelled as "Brethren of the Free Spirit" or "Spiritual Libertines," these mystics have remained something of a riddle, even after generations of research. We know what their enemies and critics said of them—and their enemies included not only popes, bishops, scholastics, inquisitors and orthodox mystics but also, in due course, Calvin. We are less certain as to what they said themselves. None of their writings discovered so far really presents a picture of a sect of mystical anarchists.

The gap can be filled if we turn to 17th-century England, and especially to the period between the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the establishment of Cromwell's Protectorate in 1653. It was a time of intense religious excitement, of ecstasies and visions and millenarian expectations, when thousands—particularly among the urban artisans—waited daily for Christ to return and set up a Kingdom of the Saints on English soil. Among the competing denominations and sects there is one that does show all the features that in earlier centuries had been attributed to the adepts of the Free Spirit. This is the sect variously known as "the high attainers," "the high professors," or (more popularly) the Ranters. These people were indeed mystical anarchists, and they startled their contemporaries both by their extremism and their numbers. "They never came up so thick as in these latter times," says a pamphlet of 1651. "They were wont to peep up by one and one, but now they sprout out by huddles and clusters (like locusts out of the bottomlesse pit). They now come thronging upon us in swarms, as the Caterpillers of Aegypt." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Taylor, *Ranters of both Sexes . . . taken and imprisoned . . .* (1651), p. 4.

At its height Ranterism engaged the attention of Parliament. On 14 June 1650 the Rump appointed a committee "to consider of a Way for Suppression of the obscene, licentious and impious Practices, used by Persons, under Pretence of Liberty, Religion, or otherwise." A week later the committee reported on "the several abominable Practices of a Sect called Ranters," and was instructed to prepare a Bill "for suppressing and punishing these abominable Opinions and Practices." The resulting Bill was passed on 9 August. Through the legal phrasology the true nature of Ranterism emerges clearly enough:

... finding to their grief and astonishment, that there are divers men and women who have lately discovered themselves to be most monstrous in their Opinions, and loose in all wicked and abominable Practices hereafter mentioned, not only to the notorious corrupting and disordering, but even to the dissolution of all Humane Society, who do deny the necessity of Civil and Moral Righteousness among Men; The Parliament... Enact and Ordain... That all and every person and persons (not distempered with sickness, or distracted in brain) who shall presume avowedly in words to profess, or shall by writing proceed to affirm and maintain him or her self, or any other meer Creature, to be very God, or to be Infinite or Almighty, or that the true God, or the Eternal Majesty dwells in the Creature

and no where else; or whosoever shall deny the Holiness and Righteousness of God, or shall presume as aforesaid to profess, That Unrighteousness in persons, or the acts of Uncleanness, Profane Swearing, Drunkenness, and the like Filthiness and Brutishness, are not unholy and forbidden in the Word of God, or that these acts in any person, or the persons for committing them, are approved of by God, or that such acts, or such persons in those things are like unto God: or that the acts of Murther, Adultery, Incest, Fornication, Uncleanness, Sodomy, Drunkenness, filthy and lascivious Speaking, are not things in themselves shameful, wicked, sinful, impious, abominable and detestable in any person, or to be practised or done by any person or persons: Or shall as aforesaid profess, That the acts of Adultery, Drunkenness, Swearing and the like open wickedness, are in their own nature as Holy and Righteous as the Duties of Prayer, Preaching or giving of Thanks to God: Or whosoever shall avowedly as aforesaid profess, That whatsoever is acted by them (whether Whoredom, Adultery, Drunkenness or the like open Wickedness) may be committed without sin; or that such men and women are most perfect, or like to God or Eternity, which do commit the greatest Sins with least remorse or sense; or that there is no such thing really and truly as Unrighteousness, Unholiness or Sin, but as man or woman judgeth thereof; or that there is neither Heaven nor Hell, neither Salvation nor Damnation, or that those are one and the same



THE RANTERS as imagined by their contemporaries. This crude but curious woodcut seems to show that smoking ranked alongside 'free love' as an expression of antinomianism.

FROM *The Readers Declaration* (1650)

thing, and that there is not any distinction or difference truly between them: All and every persons so avowedly professing, maintaining or publishing as aforesaid, the aforesaid Atheistical, Blasphemous or Execrable Opinions, or any of them, shall be . . . committed to Prison or to the House of Correction, for the space of six moneths. . . .

The Act also defines the punishment for a second offence as banishment; and the punishment for refusing to accept banishment, or for returning from banishment without special Licence of Parliament, as death.<sup>2</sup>

HOSTILE OBSERVERS tended to confuse Quakers with Ranters, and it is easy to see why. Both Quakers and Ranters were strange new sects; both discarded the outward forms of religion, what mattered for both was the "indwelling spirit." But the Quakers themselves saw matters very differently. In 1649 the founder of the Quakers, George Fox, was thrown into prison at Coventry and found himself in company with some Ranters.

When I came into the jail, where the prisoners were [Fox writes] a great power of darkness struck at me, and I sat still, having my spirit gathered into the love of God. At last these prisoners began to rant, and vapour, and blaspheme, at which my soul was greatly grieved. They said they were God; but that we could not bear such things. . . . Then seeing they said they were God, I asked them, if they knew whether it would rain tomorrow? they said they could not tell. I told them, God could tell. . . . After I had reproved them for their blasphemous expressions, I went away; for I perceived they were Ranters.<sup>3</sup>

The Quakers were much concerned to convert Ranters, and by and large they succeeded. At a joint meeting of Baptists, Quakers, and Ranters at Swannington in Leicestershire there was a dramatic confrontation. Fox found that the Ranters "were very rude, and stirred up the rude people against us. We sent to the Ranters to come forth, and try their God. Abundance of them came, who were very rude, and sung, and whistled, and danced; but the Lord's power so confounded them, that many of them came to be convinced." At a similar meeting at Reading, and later in prison at Charing Cross,

Fox was again able to reduce Ranters to confusion. Some contemporaries believed that only the Quakers could possibly have mastered Ranterism. In 1652 Fox was gratified to hear from a magistrate that but for the Society of Friends "the nation had been overrun with Ranterism, and all the justices in the nation could not have stopped it with all their laws."<sup>4</sup> It is a fact that many Ranters became Quakers. As the Quaker movement grew the Ranter movement shrank, until by the end of the Protectorate it had almost faded away.

Not unlike today's student radicals, the Ranters became a topic for instant history, analysis, and gossip. In 1650-51 a whole pamphlet literature sprang up around them; and the views it expressed ranged from the solemn dismay of John Holland's *Smoke of the Bottomlesse Pit or, A More true and fuller Discovery of the Doctrine of those men which call themselves Ranters* to the jocularity of Samuel Sheppard's comedy *The Joviall Crew, or, The Devill turn'd Ranter: Being a Character of the roaring Ranters of these times*. But a few Ranters also wrote about themselves, intimately and vividly; and though most of their works were ordered to be burned, stray copies have survived. They open a window on to one of the queerest of all the varieties of religious experience.

JOSEPH SALMON, one of the Ranters whom George Fox found in the prison at Coventry in 1649, was a writer of real poetic power. His Ranter tract, *Divinity anatomised*, is lost; but some idea of its contents can be derived from the recantation which he published in 1651, under the title *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights, or Truth no less Secretly than Sweetly sparkling out of its Glory from under a Cloud of Obloquie*. This is how he describes the experience of plunging into, and emerging from, Ranterism:

Being thus clouded from the presence of the Lord, I was violently posted through most dark paths, where I ever and anon stumbled and fell into the snare of open error and profaneness, led and hurried, (by what power let the wise judg) in a principle of mad Zeal, to tear and rend the very appearances of God, which I had formerly cherished in my brest.

Delighting my selfe in nothing but in that which rendred me most vile and ugly in the sight of all men, and glorying in nought, but my own shame. . . .

I was indeed full sick of wrath, a vial of wrath was given me to drink. . . .

<sup>2</sup> H. Scobell, *A collection of Acts and Ordinances* . . . (1658), part II, pp. 124-6.

<sup>3</sup> George Fox, *Journal* (1902), vol. I, pp. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> Fox, *Journal*, pp. 199, 95.

Well—drink I must, but mark the riddle.

'Twas given me, that I might drink, I drank,  
that I might stumble, I stumbled, that I might  
fall; I fell, and through my fall was made  
happy.

It is strange to think, how the hidden and  
secret presence of God in me, did silently rejoice  
while flesh was thus manifested;

I had a sweet rest and refuge in the Lord,  
even while my flesh was frying and scorching  
in the flames of ireful fury.

I was ark'd up in the eternal bosome, while  
the flesh was tumbling in the foaming surges of  
its vanity: . . . .

. . . . and this I know is a riddle to many, which  
none but the true Nazarite can expound; and til  
he is pleased to unfold it, it pleases me it should  
lie dark.

But to conclude—

Thus have I been forc't into the strange paths  
of obscurity, driven up and down in a tem-  
pestuous storm of wrath, and split upon the  
rocks of dreadful astonishment; All the waves  
and billows of the Almighty have gone over me.

I am now at rest in the silent deeps of eternity,  
sunk into the abyss of silence, and (having shot  
this perilous gulf) am safely arrived into the  
bosome of love; the land of rest.

I sometimes hear from the world, which I  
have now forsaken; I see its Diurnals are fraught  
with the tydings of the same clamor, strife, and  
contention, which abounded in it when I left it;  
I give it the hearing, and that's all. . . .

My great desire (and that wherein I most  
delight) is to see and say nothing.

I have run round the world of variety, and am  
now centered in eternity; that is the womb out  
of which I was taken, and to which my desires  
are now reduced. . . .

Every thing beares a constant and greedy  
motion towards the center; and when once we  
are wearied of the prolixity of variety, we  
resolve into silence, where we are as if we had  
never been. . . .

God is one simple, single, uncompounded  
glory: nothing lives in him or flows from him,  
but what is his pure individual self.

Unity is the Father, the Author and begetter of  
all things; or (if you will) the Grandmother in  
whose intrinsecal womb, variety lies occult, till  
time orderly brings it forth. . . .

Clearly Salmon was a mystic both while he  
was a Ranter and after he ceased to be one. As  
a Ranter, he had performed frenzied and blas-  
phemous acts; but even then he had remained  
inwardly untouched. And the belief at which he  
finally arrived was the belief of the Ranters  
also. For they too held that variety is contained  
in unity; and that all things flow from, or are

contained in, one single womb-like centre,  
which is God.

If Joseph Salmon represents Ranterism at its  
most refined, Laurence Clarkson (or Claxton)  
represents it at its crudest. He came from Pres-  
ton, where he was born in 1615. As a young  
man he showed Puritan leanings; being par-  
ticularly shocked by dancing on the Sabbath.  
He passed through one denomination after an-  
other, from Presbyterianism to Anabaptism and  
thence to the vaguely mystical tendency known  
as the Seekers. Sometimes he lived as an  
itinerant preacher, sometimes he had a parish;  
but, as he remarks, "not being a University  
man, was very often turned out of employment."  
Constantly in financial straits, he became a  
preacher with an Army regiment, then tried  
in vain to find a parish in London; until, in  
1649, he became a Ranter. As such he soon made  
his mark. He became the leader of a licentious  
group called "My One Flesh"; and the com-  
mittee of Parliament which investigated Ranter-  
ism was particularly shocked by his "impious  
and blasphemous book," *A Single Eye*. In 1650  
this book was publicly burned, and Clarkson  
was imprisoned for a month. It was the end of  
his career as a Ranter. On his release he prac-  
tised as an astrologer; later he became a member  
of the ultra-ascetic sect of Muggletonians.

Clarkson's Ranter tract is a manifesto of  
mystical amoralism, which justifies all the  
charges listed in the Act of Parliament. Its full  
title is *A Single Eye All Light, no Darkness; or  
Light and Darkness One. . . . This revealed in  
L.C. [i.e., Laurence Clarkson] one of the  
UNIVERSALITY. Imprinted at London, in the year  
that the POWERS of Heaven and Earth Was, Is  
and Shall be Shaken, yea Damned, till they be  
no more for EVER*. And that summarises its  
argument nicely. Time has reached its consum-  
mation, the Millennium is about to dawn—and  
the essence of that Millennium lies beyond  
good and evil. God and the Devil are to be  
overthrown by "the King of Glory," "his  
Majesty," the "Infinite Being" that knows no  
distinction between light and darkness or be-  
tween virtue and sin:

. . . So that rare it is to find the Creature that  
is awaked out of his deep sleep, that hath shaken  
off the covering, so that he can from the clear  
Appearance of God say, the veil is taken away,  
and that he believeth the Truth as it is in his  
Majesty. . . .

. . . if Reason were admitted, and thereby  
Scripture interpreted, then should they observe



The idea caught on: "I had Clients many, that I was not able to answer all desires, yet none knew our actions but ourselves... men and women came from many parts to see my face, and hear my knowledge in these things, being restless till they were made free..." But if sexual promiscuity was the most obvious expression of the Ranters' creed, it was not the only one. "The very notion of my heart," says Clarkson, "was to all manner of theft, cheat, wrong, or injury that privately could be acted, though in tongue I professed the contrary, not considering that I brake the Law in all points (murder excepted) and the ground of this my judgement was, God had made things good, so nothing evil but as man judged it."

Moreover, the doctrine had social implications of a most radical kind: "If the creature had [not] brought this world into propriety [*i.e.*, property], as Mine and Thine, there had been no such title as theft, cheat, or a lie; for the prevention hereof Everard and Gerrard Winstanley did dig up the Commons, that so all might have to live of themselves, then there had been no need of defrauding, but unity one with another." The reference to Winstanley is illuminating. Convinced that the old world was "running up like parchment in the fire, and wearing away," Winstanley had in 1649 set up an anarcho-communistic settlement of "Diggers" near Cobham in Surrey. It was an attempt, inspired by supernatural illuminations, to restore mankind to its "Virgin-state," a primitivist Millennium where private property, class distinctions, and human authority would be unknown. The Ranters shared these ideals. The "Diggers," on the other hand, did not share the Ranters' ideal of moral libertinism, and Winstanley denounced "the Rantering power" as "a devouring beast."

ABIEZER COPPE (1619-72) was a close associate of Clarkson. The early lives of the two men were very similar. Like Clarkson, Coppe started as a puritanical young man, much given to fasting, vigils, and self-mortification; and later passed through Presbyterianism and Anabaptism. Moreover, though he went up to Oxford, his career there was interrupted by the Civil War; so that he too had to make his way without the help of a university degree. At thirty he became a Ranter, and the results were startling: "'Twas usual with him," says Wood

<sup>5</sup> Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (2nd edition, 1721), Vol. II, pp. 500-2.

in *Athenae Oxonienses*,<sup>5</sup> "to preach stark naked many blasphemies and unheard-of Villanies in the Daytime, and in the Night to drink and lye with a Wench, that had been also his hearer, stark naked." Presumably it was for such eccentricities that he was imprisoned for fourteen weeks at Warwick. Later he appeared in London, as a member of "My One Flesh." He was much addicted to drink, and above all he indulged his long-suppressed craving to curse and swear. We hear of him cursing for an hour on end in the pulpit of a London church; the hostess of a tavern was so appalled by his language "that she trembled and quaked for some hours after." Disciples of his were put in the stocks for their swearing.

Once he became a Ranter, Coppe emerged as an idiosyncratic, vigorous, colourful writer—less poetic than Salmon, but far superior to Clarkson. His most noteworthy writings—*A Fiery Flying Roll* and *A Second Fiery Flying Roll*—resulted in his imprisonment, first at Coventry, later at Newgate. Parliament itself was alarmed, and ordered that all copies of these books should be seized by mayors, sheriffs, and justices of the peace throughout the Commonwealth and burnt; copies were also to be publicly burnt at Westminster, the Exchange, and Southwark. The Act of 9 August (which I have quoted above) was largely occasioned by the same works. In 1650 Coppe was examined by a committee of Parliament. During interrogation he behaved most strangely, "throwing nutshells and other things about the room" and talking to himself.

His imprisonment in Newgate lasted a year-and-a-half, and was brought to its close by a formal recantation picturesquely entitled *Coppes Return to the wayes of Truth . . . and the Wings of the Fiery flying Roll clipt*. Of his Ranting he says:

The terrible, notable day of the Lord stole upon me unawares, like a thiefe in the night. . . . And the cup of the Lords right hand, was put into mine hand. And it was filled brim full of intoxicating wine, and I drank it off, even the dregs thereof. Whereupon being mad drunk, I so strangely spake, and acted I knew not what. To the amazement of some. To the sore perplexity of others. And to the great grief of others. And till that cup passed from me, I knew not what I spake or did.

Now that "his Understanding was returned unto him," he begged that the "Wings of the Fiery Flying Roll be clipt . . . and let it be

thrown headlong into its own place, the Lake of fire and brimston, and the great Abyss from whence it came.”

The intoxicating wine which the Lord offered Coppe, and which produced such singular results, was a visionary experience. In the first *Fiery Flying Roll* Coppe describes it as follows:

First, all my strength, my forces were utterly routed, my house I dwelt in fired; my father and mother forsook me, the wife of my bosome loathed me, mine old name was rotted, perished; and I was utterly plagued, consumed, damned, ramed, and sunke into nothing, into the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe) out of which I came naked, and whetherto I returned again naked. And lying a while there, rapt up in silence, at length (the body or outward forme being awake all this while) I heard with my outward care (to my apprehension) a most terrible thunderclap, and after that a second. And upon the second thunder-clap, which was exceeding terrible, I saw a great body of light, like the light of the Sun, and red as fire in the forme of a drum (as it were) whereupon with exceeding trembling and amazement on the flesh, and with joy unspeakable in the spirit, I clapt my hands, and cryed out, *Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen.* And so lay trembling, sweating and smoaking (for the space of half an houre) at length with a loud voyce I (inwardly) cryed out, Lord, what wilt thou do with me; my most excellent majesty and eternall glory (in me) answered and sayd, Fear not, I will take thee up into mine everlasting Kingdom. But thou shalt (first) drink a bitter cup, a bitter cup, a bitter cup; whereupon (being filled with exceeding amazement) I was throwne into the belly of hell (and take what you can of it in these expressions, though the matter is beyond expression) I was among all the Devils in hell, even in their most hideous hew.

And under all this terrour, and amazement, there was a little spark of transcendent, transplendent, unspeakable glory, which survived, and sustained it self, triumphing, exulting, and exalting itself above all the Fiends. And countounding the very blacknesse of darknesse (you must take it in these tearmes, for it is infinitely beyond expression). Upon this the life was taken out of the body (for a season) and it was thus resembled, as if a man with a great brush dipt in whiting, should with one stroke wipe out, or sweep off a picture upon a wall, &c. after a while, breath and life was returned into the form againe; whereupon I saw various streames of light (in the night) which appeared to the outward eye; and immediately I saw three hearts . . . of exceeding brightness; and immediately an innumerable company of hearts, filling each corner of the room where I was. I clearly saw

distinction, diversity, variety, and as clearly saw all swallowed up into unity. And it hath been my song many times since, within and without, unity, universality, universality, unity, Eternall Majesty, &c. And at this vision, a most strong, glorious voyce uttered these words, *The spirits of just men made perfect*, the spirits &c. with whom I had as absolut, cleare, full communion, and in a two fold more familiar way, then ever I had outwardly with my dearest friends and nearest relations. The visions and revelations of God, and the strong hand of eternal invisible almightinesse, was stretched out upon me, within me, for the space of foure dayes and nights, without intermission.

THERE IS SOMETHING familiar in all this. The deep regression, the sense of returning to a timeless nothingness—the thunderclaps and the glowing light—terror among the demons—the visions symbolising the reconciliation of diversity with an all-embracing unity—these constitute a familiar pattern of mystical or quasi-mystical experience. In our own time similar experiences have been induced in some subjects by psychedelic drugs. But for Coppe the experience means not simply that he has been in contact with God, but that he has been wholly and lastingly absorbed into the divine unity. Even the authorship of the two *Flying Rolls* is ascribed to “his Most Excellent MAJESTY, dwelling in, and shining through AUXILIUM PATRIS, alias, Coppe.” And the message which God imparts through Coppe is that in that year of 1649–50 the world is to be reborn into innocence.

Clarkson used the term “Angel” to indicate a true Ranter, and Coppe shows just what this meant: an Angel was a person who had already passed into the new world beyond good and evil and had thereby risen above the normal human condition. And for Coppe, it was the mark of an Angel to be able to curse and swear with a good conscience, and to force others to curse and swear:

There are Angels (now) come downe from Heaven, in the shapes and formes of men, who are full of the vengeance of the Lord; and are to poure out the plagues of God upon the Earth, and to torment the Inhabitants thereof.

Some of these Angels I have been acquainted withall. . . .

Well! To the pure all things are pure. God hath so cleared cursing, swearing, in some, that that which goes for swearing and cursing in them, is more glorious then praying and preaching in others.

And what God hath cleansed, call not thou uncleane.

In psychological terms one could say that an Angel, or Ranter, is a person who tries to undo the socialisation which, like every human being, he has undergone in growing up, and to revert to a truly infantile spontaneity. In a remarkable flash of intuition, Coppe divined as much:

Give over, give over, or if nothing els will do it, I'l at a time, when thou leas of all thinkest of it, make thine own child, the fruit of thy loines, in whom they soul delighted, lie with a whore before thine eyes: That that plaguy holinesse and righteousnesse of thine might be confounded by that base thing. And thou be plagued back again into thy mothers womb, the womb of eternity: That thou maist become a little child, and let the mother *Eternity*, *Almightinesse*, who is universall love, and whose service is perfect freedome, dresse thee, undresse thee, swadle, unswadle, blind, loose, lay thee down, take thee up, &c.

And to such a little child, undressing is as good as dressing, foul cloaths, as good as fair cloaths—he knows no evil, &c.—And shall see evill no more,—but he must first lose all his righteousnesse, every bit of his holinesse, and every crum of Religion, and be plagued, and confounded (by base things) into nothing.

Moreover, the process of regression leads back again to the ecstatic experience of total union with the undifferentiated God, who is also one's self:

And yet I shew you a more excellent way, when you have past this. In a word, my plaguy, filthy, nasty, holinesse hath been confounded by base things. And then (behold I shew you a mystery, and put forth a riddle to you) by base things, base things so called have been confounded also; and thereby have I been confounded into eternall Majesty, unspeakable glory, my life, my self.

Ther's my riddle, but because neither all the Lords of the Philistins, no nor my Deliliah her self can read it,

I'l read it my self, I'l (only) hint it thus.

Kisses are numbered amongst transgressors—base things—well; by base hellish swearing, and cursing, (as I have accounted it in the time of my fleshly holinesse) and by base impudent kisses (as I then accounted them) my plaguy holinesse hath been confounded, and thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone. . . .

And by, and through these BASE things (as upon the wings of the wind) have I been carried up into the arms of my love, which is invisible peace, and perfect freedome; which can never be glory, eternall Majesty, purity it self, unspotted beauty, even that beauty which maketh all other beauty but meer uglinesse, when set against it, &c.

Which transcendent, unspeakable, unspotted beauty, is my crown and joy, my life and love: and though I have chosen, and cannot be without BASE things, to confound some in mercy, some in judgment, Though also I have concubines without number, which I cannot be without, yet this is my spouse, my love, my dove, my fair one.



RANTERS

FROM: "Hell Broke Loose. . ." (1657)

But for Coppe—and for Clarkson—the re-birth of the world into innocence also implies a radical transformation of society. All distinctions of wealth and status will disappear. Human beings will live in total equality and total community.

Thus saith the Lord, *I inform you, that I overturn, overturn, overturn.* And as the Bishops, Charles, and the Lords, have had their turn, overturn, so your turn shall be next (ye surviving great ones) by what Name or Title soever dignified or distinguished, who ever you are, that oppose me, the Eternal God, who am UNIVERSALL LOVE, and whose service is perfect freedom, and pure Libertinisme. . . .

And now thus saith the Lord: . . .

Behold, behold, behold, I the eternal God, the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveller, am comming (yea even at the doores) to Levell in good earnest, to Levell to some purpose, to Levell with a witnesse, to Levell the Hills with the Valleys, and to lay the Mountaines low.

And the Prime levelling, is laying low the Mountaines, and levelling the Hills in man.

But this is not all.

For this Honour, Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity, &c. hath (without contradiction) been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtinesse, loftinesse, murder, malice, of all manner of wickednesse and impiety; yea the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed, from the blood of the righteous *Abell*, to the blood of the last Levellers that were shot to death. *And now (as I live saith the Lord) I am come to make inquisition for blood; for murder and pride, &c.*

I see the root of it all. *The Axe is laid to the root of the Tree* (by the Eternal God, *My Self*, saith the Lord) *I will hew it down.* And as I live, I will plague your Honour, Pompe, Greatnesse, Superfluity, and confound it into parity, equality, community; that the neck of horrid pride, murder, malice, and tyranny, &c. may be chopt off at one blow. And that my selfe, the Eternal God, who am Universall Love, may fill the Earth with universall love, universall by humane sword or strength accomplished. . . .

God, in other words, will bring about the egalitarian Millennium not by force of arms but by changing the hearts of men. In a passage which can still arouse sympathy, Coppe demands compassion and recognition for the outcasts of society:

Thus saith the Lord: Be wise now therefore, O ye Rulers, &c. Be instructed, &c. Kisse the Sunne, &c. Yea, kisse Beggars, Prisoners, warme them, feed them, cloathe them, money them, relieve them, release them, take them into your

houses, don't serve them as dogs, without doore, &c.

Owne them, they are flesh of your flesh, your owne brethren, your owne Sisters, every whit as good (and if I should stand in competition with you) in some degrees better then your selves. . . .

Mine eares are filled brim full with cryes of poore prisoners, Newgate, Ludgate cryes (of late) are seldome out of mine eares. Those dolefull cryes, Bread, bread, bread for the Lords sake, pierce mine eares, and heart, I can no longer forebeare.

. . . Loose the bands of wickednesse, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, and breake every yoake. Deale thy bread to the hungry, and bring the poore that are cast out (both of houses and Synagogues) to thy house. Cover the naked: Hide not thy self from thine owne flesh, from a crepple, a rogue, a begger, he's thine owne flesh. From a Whoremonger, a thief, &c. he's flesh of thy flesh, and his theft, and whoredome is flesh of thy flesh also, thine owne flesh. Thou maist have ten times more of each within thee, then he that acts outwardly in either, Remember, turn not away thine eyes from thine OWN FLESH.

But in Coppe there is at least as much hatred and exhibitionism as there is compassion. In a sort of one-man demonstration he precludes and illustrates the great reversal:

And because I am found of those that sought me not.

And because some say, wilt thou not tell us what these things are to us, that thou dost so?

Wherefore waving my charging so many Coaches, so many hundreds of men and women of the greater rank, in the open streets, with my hand stretched out, my hat cock't up, staring on them as if I would look thorough them, gnashing with my teeth at some of them and day and night with a huge loud voice proclaiming the day of the Lord throughout London and Southwark, and leaving divers other exploits, &c. It is my good will and pleasure (only) to single out the former story with its Parallels.

(*Viz.*) in clipping, hugging, imbracing, kissing a poore deformed wretch in London, who had no more nose on his face, then I have on the back of my hand, (but only two little holes in the place where the nose uses to stand.)

And no more eyes to be seen then on the back of my hand, and afterwards running back to him in a strange manner, with my money giving it to him, to the joy of some, to the afrightment and wonderment of other Spectators.

As also in falling down flat upon the ground before rogues, beggars, cripples, halt, maimed, blind, &c. kissing the feet of many, rising up againe, and giving them money, &c. Besides that

notorious businesse with the Gypseys and Gaol-birds (mine own brethren and sisters, flesh of my flesh), and as good as the greatest Lord in England) at the prison in Southwark near S. Georges Church.

Now that which rises up from under all this heap of ashes, will fire both heaven and earth; the one's ashamed, and blushes already, the other reels to and fro, like a drunken man.

**B**UT ABUSE OF THE RICH and identification with the poor is not enough. The root of the evil is the institution of private property itself. Coppe describes how, riding across an open field, he met a poor cripple in rags. At first he was tempted to give him some part only of the money he had about him, on the grounds that a man must provide first for himself and his own family. But then

the rust of my silver rose up in judgement against me, and consumed my flesh as with fire: . . . that I was fain to cast all I had into the hands of him, whose visage was more marr'd then any mans that I ever saw.

This is a true story, most true in the history.

Its true also in the mystery.

And there are deep ones coucht under it, for its a shadow of various, glorious (though strange) good things to come.

Well! to return—after I had thrown my rusty canker'd money into the poor wretches hands, I rode away from him, being filled with trembling, joy, and amazement, feeling the sparkles of a great glory arising up from under the ashes.

For the day was at hand when private property would be abolished, wholly and for ever:

(Thus saith the Lord,)

I say (once more) deliver, deliver, my money which thou hast . . . to poor creeples, lazars, yea to rogues, thieves, whores, and cut-purses, who are flesh of thy flesh, and every whit as good as thy self in mine eye, who are ready to starve in plaguy Gaols, and nasty dungeons, or els by my selfe, saith the Lord, I will torment thee day and night, inwardly, or outwardly, or both waies, my little finger shall shortly be heavier on thee, especially on thee thou holy, righteous, religious *Appropriator*, then my loynes were on *Pharaoh* and the Egyptians in time of old; you shall weep and howl for the miseries that are suddenly coming upon you; for your riches are corrupted, &c. and whilst impropiated, appropriated the plague of God is in them.

<sup>6</sup> A. Birlinger (ed.), *Ein wunder nützes disputieren . . .*, in *Alemannia* (Bonn, 1875), vol. III, p. 31.

The plague of God is in your purses, barns, houses, horses, murrain will take your hogs, (O ye fat swine of the earth) who shall shortly go to the knife, and be hung up i'th roof, except—blasting, mill-dew, locusts, caterpillars, yea fire your houses and goods, take your corn and fruit, the moth your garments, and the rot your sheep, did you not see my hand this last year, stretched out?

You did not see.

My hand is stretched out still.

Your gold and silver, though you can't see it, is cankered, the rust of them is a witness against you, and suddainly, because by the eternall God, my self, its the dreadful day of Judgment, saith the Lord, shall eat your flesh as it were fire, *Jam. 5. 1 to 7.*

The rust of your silver, I say, shall eat your flesh as it were fire. . . .

. . . give, give, give, give up, give up your houses, horses, goods, gold, Lands, give up, account nothing your own, have ALL THINGS common, or els the plague of God will rot and consume all that you have.

By God, by my self, saith the Lord, its true.

**T**HE RANTERS have been almost wholly forgotten, yet they are entitled to a modest niche in history. Their full significance emerges when they are seen as a link in a long series of mystical or quasi-mystical anarchists extending from the thirteenth century to the present day. Reading between the lines, one can divine from their own writings where their way of viewing the world would have led, if it had been pursued to its logical conclusion. To see these ultimate, extreme implications spelt out one can look either back to the Middle Ages or forward to our own time.

To quote a 14th-century adept of the Free Spirit: "When a man has reached the great and high knowledge, he is no longer bound to observe any law or any command, for he has become one with God. God created all things to serve such a person, and all that God ever created is the property of such a man. . . . He shall take from all creatures as much as his nature desires and craves, and shall have no scruples of conscience about it, for all created things are his property. . . . A man whom all heaven serves, all people and creatures are indeed obliged to serve and obey; and if any disobeys, it alone is guilty."<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of such a world-view it was possible to build up a group of followers who combined blind devotion to their living God with utter callousness towards everyone else. As one

follower remarked, if his "Christ" ordered it he could murder without committing any sin; for the only sin would be to disobey or deny his "Christ." By making an act of total submission he had "entered the state of primal innocence."<sup>7</sup>

AT THE END of 1969 a number of male and female hippies were arrested in California on charges of murder. According to press reports, their leader too called himself Jesus, while his "family," consisting chiefly of young women with whom he lived, considered themselves

<sup>7</sup> K. Schmidt, *Nicolaus von Basel* (Vienna, 1866), pp. 66-69.

<sup>8</sup> *Evening News* (London), 2 December, 1969; *The Times* (London), 4, 5, 6, and 8 December, 1969.

bound to do his bidding without question. They felt that in so doing they were divinely guided, above the law: "We belong to him, not to ourselves." The murdered victims were conspicuously rich people, who were killed in order to "liberate" them from their affluence and also as a protest against a stratified society. Behind all this lay a "philosophy" which regarded all human beings as one undivided whole, at once God and Devil: "There is no good, there is no bad, there is no crime, there is no sin." And this "philosophy" in turn was legitimated in terms of ecstatic experiences, induced in this case by psychedelic drugs.<sup>8</sup>

The idiom of the Ranters belongs to 17th-century England and nowhere else. Their ideas and ideals have a wider relevance.

## Tourist Promotion

For the tourists, who stay in the  
Large new tourist hotels, the  
Chief tourist attractions are the  
Other large new tourist hotels.

For the querulous and wayward  
There were once the local monkeys,  
Who lived in the ancient tree-tops  
Long before the hotels were thought of.  
The tourists enticed the monkeys down  
From the trees with monkey nuts and  
Breakfast rolls. And the monkeys  
Scampered across the road and were  
Squashed by the buses transporting  
Fresh tourists to see the monkeys.  
It was not a pretty sight.

So now the tourists are confined to  
The tourist hotels, large and new.  
They pass with the greatest of ease  
From one to the other, escorted by porters  
With large new umbrellas, or even through  
Underground passages, air-conditioned and  
Adorned with murals by local artists,  
Conveying impressions of the local scene.  
After all, the tourist hotels were created  
Specifically for the sake of the tourists.

*D. J. Enright*