
ABIEZER COPPE

When Winstanley declared that “every single man, male and female, is a perfect creature of himself,” needing no teacher or ruler other than the spirit within, the individualist strain of Puritanism might seem to have reached its limit. But there was another impulse at work also, antinomianism, the belief that the Mosaic law (the Ten Commandments) and the moral law itself are abrogated for the elect, who are saved by grace alone. Less extreme antinomians (like Milton) held that Christians were freed from the law in order to follow the law of love written in the heart, an even higher moral standard. But extremists, like Abiezer Coppe (1619–1672) and his fellow Ranters, held that the elect, saved by grace and inhabited by God, are perfect, are incapable of sin, and have a religious duty, by sinning freely, frequently and publicly, to demonstrate their sanctity. Drawn largely from the ranks of apprentices, distressed urban artisans, and itinerants of various sorts, Ranters flourished from 1649 to about 1654: some cursed and blasphemed constantly, others drank to excess, smoked strong tobacco in their meetings, ran naked in the streets, and fornicated openly, often, and with multiple mates. They earned their name, Ranters, by their random, hectic, “inspired” discourse, rooted heavily in the Bible and the experiential; the Ranter prophetic voice attempts to escape from the usual forms and conventions of language. Abiezer Coppe, perhaps the most notorious Ranter, spent some time at Oxford University, then became an itinerant preacher; between jail terms he produced two tracts in 1649, both titled *A Fiery Flying Roll*, from which these extracts are taken.

From A Fiery Flying Roll

* * * Behold, behold, behold, I the eternal God, the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveler, am coming (yea, even at the doors) to level in good earnest, to level to some purpose, to level with a witness, to level the hills with the valleys, and to lay the mountains low.¹

High mountains! lofty cedars! it's high time for you to enter into the rocks and to hide you in the dust for fear of the Lord and for the glory of his majesty. For the lofty looks of man shall be humbled and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord ALONE shall be exalted in that day. * * *

Hills! Mountains! Cedars! Mighty men! Your breath is in your nostrils.

Those that have admired, adored, idolized, magnified, set you up, fought for you, ventured goods and good name, limb and life for you, shall cease from you.

You shall not at all be accounted of (not one of you), ye sturdy oaks who bow not down before eternal Majesty—Universal Love, whose service is perfect freedom, and who hath put down the mighty (remember, remember your fore-runner),² and who is putting down the mighty from their seats, and exalting them of low degree. * * *

And the prime leveling is laying low the mountains and leveling the hills in Man.

1. Coppe's prose is too saturated with biblical phrases and echoes to be fully annotated; here the phrasing is from Isaiah 40.

2. Given the date of Coppe's *Roll*, he may be alluding to Charles I.

* * *

The eternal God, the mighty Leveler is coming, yea come, even at the door; and what will you do in that day? * * *

Mine ears are filled brimful with cries of poor prisoners, Newgate, Ludgate cries (of late) are seldom out of mine ears. Those doleful cries, *Bread, bread, bread for the Lord's sake*, pierce mine ears and heart, I can no longer forbear.

Wherefore hie you apace to all prisons in the kingdom,

Bow before those poor, nasty, lousy, ragged wretches, say to them, your humble servants, sirs (without a compliment), we let you go free and serve you, &c.

Do this or (as I live, saith the Lord) thine eyes (at least) shall be bored out, and thou carried captive into a strange land.

* * * Loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke. Deal thy bread to the hungry, and bring the poor that are cast out (both of houses and synagogues) to thy house. Cover the naked: hide not thyself from thine own flesh, from a cripple, a rogue, a beggar, he's thine own flesh. From a whoremonger, a thief, &c., he's flesh of thy flesh, and his flesh and whoredom is flesh of thy flesh also, thine own flesh. Thou mayest have ten times more of each within thee than he that acts outwardly in either. Remember, turn not away thine eyes from thine OWN FLESH.

Give over, give over thy midnight mischief.

Let branding with the letter B³ alone.

Be no longer so horridly, hellishly, impudently, arrogantly wicked as to judge what is sin, what not, what evil and what not, what blasphemy and what not.

For thou and all thy reverend divines, so-called (who divine for tithes, hire, and money, and serve the Lord Jesus Christ for their own bellies), are ignorant of this one thing:

That sin and transgression is finished, it's a mere riddle that they with all their human learning can never read.

Neither can they understand what pure honor is wrapped up in the king's motto, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. Evil to him that evil thinks.⁴

Some there are who are accounted the offscouring of all things, who are Noble Knights of the Garter. Since which—they could see no evil, think no evil, do no evil, know no evil.

ALL is religion that they speak, and honor that they do.

* * *

A strange yet most true story; under which is couched that Lion whose roaring shall make all the beasts of the field tremble, and all the kingdoms of the earth quake. * * *

Follow me, who last Lord's day, Septem. 30, 1649, met him in open field, a most strange deformed man, clad with patched clouts; who looking wishly⁵ on me, mine eye pitied him; and my heart, or the day of the Lord, which burned as an oven in me, set my tongue on flame to speak to him, as followeth:

How now friend, art thou poor?[?]

He answered, yea Master very poor.

3. For Blasphemer. "Let": cease.

4. The motto of the Order of the Garter delights Coppe because it implies that evil exists only in the

eye of the beholder.

5. Intently.

Whereupon my bowels trembled within me, and quivering fell upon the worm-eaten chest (my corpse,⁶ I mean), that I could not hold a joint still.

And my great love within me (who is the great God within that chest or corpse) was burning hot toward him; and made the lock-hole of the chest, to wit the mouth of the corpse, again to open, thus:

Art poor?

Yea, very poor, said he.

Whereupon the strange woman who flattereth with her lips and is subtle of heart said within me,

It's a poor wretch, give him twopence.

But my EXCELLENCY and MAJESTY (in me) scorned her words, confounded her language, and kicked her out of his presence.

But immediately the WELL-FAVORED HARLOT,⁷ whom I carried not upon my horse behind me, but who rose up in me, said:

—It's a poor wretch, give him sixpence and that's enough for a squire or knight to give to one poor body.

—Besides (saith the holy Scripturian whore), he's worse than an infidel that provides not for his own family.

—True love begins at home, &c.

—Thou and thy family are fed as the young ravens, strangely, though thou hast been a constant preacher, yet thou hast abhorred both tithes and hire; and thou knowest not aforehand who will give thee the worth of a penny.

—Have a care of the main chance.

And thus she flattereth with her lips and her words being smoother than oil; and her lips dropping as the honeycomb, I was fired to hasten my hand into my pocket; and, pulling out a shilling, said to the poor wretch, Give me sixpence, here's a shilling for thee.⁸

He answered, I cannot, I have never a penny.

Whereupon I said, I would fain have given thee something if thou couldst have changed my money.

Then saith he, God bless you.

Whereupon with much reluctancy, with much love, and with amazement (of the right stamp) I turned my horse head from him, riding away. But a while after I was turned back (being advised by my Demilance⁹) to wish him call for sixpence, which I would leave at the next town at one's house, which I thought he might know—Sapphira-like,¹ keeping back part.

But (as God judged me) I, as she, was struck down dead.

And behold the plague of God fell into my pocket, and the rust of my silver rose up against me and consumed my flesh as with fire; so that I and my money perished with me.

I being cast into that lake of fire and brimstone.

And all the money I had about me to a penny (though I thought through the instigation of my *quondam* Mistress to have reserved some, having rode about 8 miles, not eating one mouthful of bread that day, and had drunk but one small draught of drink, and had between 8 and 9 miles more to ride ere I came

6. Coppe puns on Latin *Corpus* and English *corpse*.

7. The two women within Coppe may indicate, respectively, simple greed and hypocritical self-interest.

8. Give me change. A shilling was equivalent to twelve pence.

9. Possibly a misprint for Delilah.

1. Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, tried to cheat the Apostles of their just due (Acts 5).

to my journey's end; my horse being lame, the ways dirty, it raining all the way, and I not knowing what extraordinary occasion I might have for money). Yet (I say) the rust of my silver did so rise up in judgment against me, and burnt my flesh like fire; and the 5th of James² thundered such an alarm in mine ears, that I was fain to cast all I had into the hands of him, whose visage was more marred than any man's that I ever saw.

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

It's true also in the mystery.

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

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

After this, I was made (by that divine power which dwelleth in this Ark or chest) to turn my horse head—whereupon I beheld this poor deformed wretch looking earnestly after me; and upon that, was made to put off my hat, and bow to him seven times, and was (at that strange posture) filled with trembling and amazement, some sparkles of glory arising up also from under this, as also from under these ashes; yet I rode back once more to the poor wretch, saying, Because I am a King I have done this, but you need not tell anyone.

The day's our own.

This was done on the last LORD'S DAY, Septem. 30 in the year 1649, which is the year of the Lord's recompenses for Zion, and the day of his Vengeance,³ the dreadful day of Judgment. But I have done (for the present) with this story, for it is the latter end of the year 1649.

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2. James 5.1–6 fiercely denouncer the wealthy. "Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire" (5.3).

3. Coppe may be recalling that January 30, just eight months before, was the day of King Charles's execution.