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DEBATE
FEAR, MYTH AND FURORE: REAPPRAISING THE "RANTERS"

I

The debate inspired by J. C. Davis's *Fear, Myth and History*[1] has concentrated, first, on the presence or not of a consistent doctrine of pantheistic antinomianism in the Ranter writings of 1650; secondly, on whether there was a Ranter sect, movement or milieu and what such terms might mean; thirdly, on whether the frequent references to Ranters after 1650 attest to their existence or to the potency and durability of myth. Of Davis's reviewers only Barry Reay has directed critical attention to the plausibility of his thesis that the Ranters were created by a campaign of yellow journalism between October 1650 and January 1651.[2] I should like to develop some of Reay's points by surveying the evidence for and attitudes towards Ranters before the myth was supposedly created and the effectiveness of that myth after 1651, particularly as illustrated by Quaker and Baptist sources.

The essentially semantic dispute over the type of evidence required to prove that there was a common doctrine or corporate identity that might be called "Ranterism" has not been productive. It is also a dubious methodology. More appropriate would be to ask how the term evolved and how it was used by contemporaries. The yellow press did not invent a Ranter image of deviance: it was implicit in the current usage of the term as "a noisy, riotous, dissipated fellow".[3] Like "Leveller", "Seeker" and "Quaker", "Ranter" or "Raunter" was a popular pejorative, of uncertain provenance, referring to some reprehensible characteristic of the denomination incidental to its fundamental beliefs. Such inexact terms of opprobrium usually prevailed over more precise descriptions, as "Whig" over "Exclusionist". The first

[1] J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986).
[2] Barry Reay, in *Political Science*, xl (1988), pp. 99-100.
[3] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Ranter".

surviving evidence for its association with Puritan antinomians is
found in two tracts of March 1650 by Gerrard Winstanley in
which he defended his Digger community against charges that
they adhered to Ranting principles and practices. He defined
Ranting practice as "the outward enjoyment of meat, drinke,
pleasures, and women" and Ranting principle as "the man within
can have no quiet rest, unlesse he enjoy these outward objects in
excesse".[4] Winstanley barely adumbrated Ranter theology but
his "Ranting principle" reflected the doctrine of Laurence Clark-
son, whom he may have known, that "till acted that so called
sin, thou art not delivered from the power of sin".[5] Assuming
that the term was coined among the radical circles in which
Winstanley moved, it probably reflected the association of Ranters
with the culture of the alehouse which Abiezer Coppe noted and
Clarkson celebrated.[6] Much of the evidence for Ranters, whether
from the scurrilous press or government records, royalist propa-
gandists or Puritan heresiographers, Baptists or Quakers, follows
the Digger's model. The current usage of the word endowed the
antinomian enthusiasts to whom it was applied with the character-
istics of the idle, blaspheming, revelling fornicator. Conversely
there are many references to Ranter behaviour which do not
unambiguously attribute it to religious inspiration. Much of the
evidence is ambiguous. More relevant to Davis's thesis, however,
the quite logical application of the popular term for a dissolute
life to the advocacy of practical antinomianism preceded the press
sensation by at least six months.

There is adequate evidence that the authorities shared Winstan-
ley's concern at the emergence of Ranter antinomianism. The act
of August 1650 is traditionally known as the "Blasphemy Act"
and seen as the Rump Parliament's attempt to suppress an emer-
ging Ranter movement. Davis is unique in denying that the act

[4] Gerrard Winstanley, *A Vindication . . . of Those Called Diggers* (London, 1650),
in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. George H. Sabine (Ithaca, 1941), p. 399. See
also "England's Spirit Unfoulded, or an Incouragement to Take the *Engagement*: A
Newly Discovered Pamphlet by Gerrard Winstanley", ed. G. E. Aylmer, *Past and
Present*, no. 40 (July 1968), pp. 14-15.
[5] Laurence Clarkson, *A Single Eye All Light* (London, 1650), T.C., E.614 (1),
p. 14.
[6] Abiezer Coppe, *A Remonstrance of the Sincere and Zealous Protestation of Abiezer
Coppe* (London, 1651), T.C., E.621 (5), p. 1; Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep
Found* (London, 1660), p. 28. For Ranters and alehouses, see Christopher Hill, *The
World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London,
1972), pp. 158-61.

proscribed Ranter blasphemy. He notes its failure to mention Ranters and its "marked relaxation of the draconian penalties of the earlier ordinance of May 1648", indicating no great concern about a Ranter menace before the yellow-press campaign.[7] The act's proper title, "against severall atheistical, blasphemous and execrable opinions", leads him to conclude that it was "an act against atheism first, against blasphemy second". It reflected a stereotypical fear of atheism which was to become one of the key components of the Ranter myth.[8] Davis is correct in asserting that the Blasphemy Act did not mention Ranters. It was, however, drafted by a committee set up in June 1650 after the appearance of Clarkson's *A Single Eye All Light*, which reported a week later on the "several abominable Practices of a Sect called Ranters" and the substance of Clarkson's tract. The bill was described by an official newspaper as designed to suppress "the strange meetings and practises of those commonly called Raunters" and the committee in the parliamentary journal as producing "a bill against the Raunters".[9] The priority of atheistical opinions in the title is superficial evidence for Davis's maintaining that the act was principally against atheism, and inconsistent with his assertion that it was "at its heart a repudiation of religious formalism", also the theme of Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll*. Formalism was only fourth in the preamble's subsidiary list of errors: "Prophaneness, Wickedness, Superstition and Formality".[10] Most curious is Davis's assumption that the substance of a piece of legislation can be culled from its title and preamble alone. Apart from the repetition of the title phrase, the act neither mentioned atheism nor sought to define it beyond a reference to denying "the Holiness and Righteousness of God" which clearly referred to blasphemy. The body of the legislation was largely a description of Ranter doctrine, owing much to the writings of Coppe and Clarkson, within a general definition of blasphemous enthusiasm: claims to be God or to have the attributes of God. The act was against atheism only in the most general sense of holding such opinions

[7] J. C. Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", *Past and Present*, no. 129 (Nov. 1990), pp. 81-2.

[8] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 113.

[9] *A Perfect Diurnall*, 24-30 June 1651, T.C., E.786; *Commons Jls.*, vi, pp. 423, 427, 493. The original reference of the House was to "obscene, licentious, and impious Practices, used by Persons, under Pretence of Liberty, Religion or otherwise".

[10] *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, 3 vols. (London, 1911), ii, p. 409.

to be denying and blaspheming God. It was and always has been known as the "Blasphemy Act": indictments and prosecutions almost invariably referred to the offence of blasphemy.

The lenience of the act in comparison with the "Draconick Ordinance" of 1648 is not evidence of parliament's indifference to a Ranter menace. The 1648 legislation was no longer politically acceptable since it had not only made the blasphemies covered by the 1650 act capital offences but had prescribed indefinite imprisonment for all contumaciously denying predestinarian Presbyterianism.[11] The act of August 1650 was more specifically directed at extreme enthusiasm and more consistent with Independent ideals of toleration. It foreshadowed the principle of the Instrument of Government permitting any Protestant faith, except prelacy, which did not deny the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, promote immorality or disturb the peace.[12] The Blasphemy Act was part of the Rump's legislative programme in 1650 for the reformation of manners including acts against adultery, common swearing and for the observance of the Lord's Day. Its nature and purpose are more evident when it is considered as part of a legislative program of moral reform, rather than the successor to the Heresy Ordinance of 1648. The penalty for a first offence, six months in a house of correction, strongly suggests that Ranter principle and practice, indeed deviant enthusiasm in general, were considered a lower-class threat to public order and morality. Ranter activity at least occasioned the Blasphemy Act and probably hastened the progress of some other legislation through parliament. The bill against adultery was ordered to be presented to the House immediately after the condemnation of Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll* and three days later parliament voted for a fast to contemplate sins committed "under pretence of liberty and greater measure of light".[13]

The background to the Blasphemy Act does not support Davis's assertion that the government was unconcerned about Ranters until they emerged as a sensational model of deviance in the yellow press. Nor can it be demonstrated that, before the sensation, "there was little evidence that the courts were anything but indifferent to the Ranters. Where leading individuals were

[11] *Ibid.*, i, pp. 1133-6.
[12] J. P. Kenyon, *The Stuart Constitution* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 347.
[13] *Commons Jls.*, vi, pp. 354, 357; Blair Worden, *The Rump Parliament* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 232-4.

charged, the courts most often failed to convict".[14] The soldier Jacob Bauthumley was cruelly punished under the articles of war. There was no appropriate legislation under which to try the civilian leaders until the act of August 1650 which, Davis fails to appreciate, was not retrospective. The exception was Thomas Webbe, the Wiltshire Ranter, who was cleared by an assize jury not of blasphemy but of adultery, a capital offence under the act of May 1650. Successful prosecutions were to prove rare.[15] For want of suitable legislation most of the Ranter leaders were dealt with by the Council of State and the parliamentary committee. The Council initially adopted a relatively conciliatory attitude which suggests a reluctance to punish religious dissent. Coppe and Joseph Salmon were offered freedom in exchange for public recantations. A more rigorous approach is evident from about the time of the appearance of Clarkson's *A Single Eye All Light* in June. Parliament urged the Council to bring Coppe speedily to trial and in September, after the sentencing of Clarkson, Coppe's case was transferred to the committee. It honoured the Council's deal of freedom for recantation. Clarkson's sentence was a variation of the penal provisions of the Blasphemy Act.[16] The Council's initial policy of persuasion should not, however, disguise the severity of the Ranter leaders' treatment. The state's systematic campaign of repression has no parallels during the Interregnum: book burnings and lengthy periods of imprisonment, the mutilation of Bauthumley and the sentence of banishment, albeit not executed, on Clarkson. As a group the Ranter leaders were suppressed as wicked and horrid blasphemers. The Ranter correspondence which came into the authorities' hands must more effectively have provoked anxiety than the scurrilities of the hack journalists. It suggested a Ranter network with a busy core of itinerant evangelists, in close contact by correspondence, who enjoyed considerable prestige among groups of enthusiasts in Wiltshire and Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Essex and London.[17]

[14] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 81.

[15] Edward Stokes, *The Wiltshire Rant* (London, 1652), T.C., E.669 (5), p. 43; Keith Thomas, "The Puritans and Adultery: The Act of 1650 Reconsidered", in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 258, 280.

[16] *Commons Jls.*, vi, pp. 427, 443, 474-6.

[17] Worcester College, Oxford, Clarke MS. 18, fos. 23-7. See also the letters reprinted in Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, pp. 13-14; *A Perfect Diurnall*, 18-25 Mar. 1650, T.C., E.534. Clarkson's autobiography, to which Davis gives no credence, mentions Ranter sympathizers whose names also appear in Coppe's letters.

Such evidence raised fears of a widespread Ranter movement not assuaged by the doctrinal inconsistencies which Davis finds in the Ranter tracts.

The Commonwealth's reaction to the Ranters is characterized by a lack of panic, moral or otherwise. It acted decisively while compromising the principle of toleration as little as possible. In September 1650 it repealed all penal legislation requiring attendance at Sunday service, hardly the act of a regime fearful that religious freedom would encourage moral licence. On the same day it announced the punishment of Clarkson "to stop the slandrous mouths of those that publish abroad such vile reports of the Common-wealth, as if they intended to countenance impious and licentious practices, under the pretence of Religion and Liberty". Clarkson's fate preoccupied the newspapers: the act went largely unnoticed.[18] The Rump's measures against Ranters were operating before the appearance in the yellow press of the Ranter sensation which Davis surmises was inspired by the reappearance in October 1650 of Clarkson's tract which, he concedes, "comes so close to the Ranter typology as to be virtually indistinguishable".[19] In fact the bulk of the journalism appeared between late November and the end of January 1651, coinciding with the legal proceedings against a group of alleged Ranters taken at the "David and Harp", Moor Lane, in the City, when a Bacchanalian evening degenerated into boisterous blasphemy. The reports of their examinations and trials in the official newspapers, which Davis allows no more credibility than the fantasies of the yellow press, do not prove conclusively that they were practical antinomians although the publican's wife had the same surname as one of Laurence Clarkson's mistresses.[20] But they fuelled the fertile imagination of the yellow press. The Ranter scandal was inspired by the Moor Lane trials and exploited by a few hack journalists.[21]

[18] *Mercurius Politicus*, 26 Sept. – 3 Oct. 1650, T.C., E.613; Worden, *Rump Parliament*, pp. 239-40.
[19] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 63.
[20] *The Faithful Scout*, 17-24 Jan. 1651, T.C., E.781; *A Perfect Account*, 13-20 Aug. 1651, T.C., E.640; *Perfect Passages of Every Daies Intelligence*, 15-22 Aug. 1651, T.C., E.787. The date of the Moor Lane episode is established by the record of the participants as new inmates of Bridewell on 8 November 1650: Guildhall Library, London, Bridewell Royal Hospital, court book, 1642-58, pp. 468, 471-2.
[21] *The Routing of the Ranters* (London, 1650), T.C., E.616 (9), pp. 4-5; *The Ranters Ranting* (London, 1650), T.C., E.618 (8), pp. 1-2; *The Arraignment and Trial with a Declaration of the Ranters* (London, 1650), T.C., E.620 (3), pp. 5-6; *Strange Newes from Newgate and the Old-Bailly* (London, 1651), T.C., E.622 (3), pp. 2-3.

Their impact was superficial and ephemeral. There is no warrant for Davis's assertion that "the yellowpress Ranter sensation of late 1650 and early 1651 was quantitatively impressive and influential in its imagery".[22] It would appear that after liberalizing Sabbath observance, probably a sop to the radicals after the victory over the Scots at Dunbar, the Rump increasingly deferred to conservative anxieties about the consequences of religious toleration.[23] Davis can, however, cite less than a handful of printed expressions of such anxieties with an anti-Ranter theme and is unable to demonstrate that they perpetuated the yellow-press image of deviance.[24] Nor did the Commonwealth display its more conservative credentials by cultivating an anti-Ranter posture. Ranters subsequently preoccupied neither the Council of State nor the parliamentary committee which is last recorded meeting early in November 1650.[25] It is clear from the evidence that the government was much more concerned about Ranters before than after the great press sensation.

The most substantial and significant evidence for the survival of Ranters after 1651 is to be found in Quaker and Baptist sources, dismissed by Davis as mere manipulation of the Ranter myth by the leaders of those movements to discredit the rebel enthusiasts in their ranks.[26] Davis does not appear to have consulted most of the sources, preferring to rely on some general statements of my own which he takes out of context and so distorts.[27] Allusions to Ranters in Quaker sources *after 1660* are usually attempts by leading Friends to discredit dissidents by identifying them with a retrospectively discovered Ranting strain within the sect which began with James Nayler in 1656. The Interregnum sources, however, describe a phenomenon external to and distinct from the Quakers. Much of the evidence is ambiguous because it elaborates the popular meaning of "Ranting" as used by Winstanley, applying it to any contravention of the Quakers' moral code. Common cursing, playing bowls and shuffle-board were con-

[22] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 92.
[23] Worden, *Rump Parliament*, pp. 238-40.
[24] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 86-7.
[25] *Commons Jls.*, vi, p. 439.
[26] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 88-93; Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 84.
[27] J. F. McGregor, "Ranterism and the Development of Early Quakerism", *Jl. Relig. Hist.*, ix (1977), p. 360; J. F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters", in J. F. McGregor and Barry Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), p. 136.

demned as Ranting behaviour, as well as any rowdy reception of
Quaker evangelism. Nevertheless there are sufficient examples of
antinomian Ranters who, in George Fox's words, "call all things
one; light and darknesse one; and now their glory is to commit
sin with greedinesse: and saith they are redeemed into libertie".[28]
Most significant is Richard Farnsworth's account of a debate in
1655 with Jacob Bauthumley, whom Davis regards as no more a
Ranter than Winstanley.[29] To paraphrase, Farnsworth claimed
that Bauthumley held the action of sin to be nothing to the
creature: it was the evil principle which committed the act. There
was no sin to him that did not imagine it so. Therefore it was
possible for a man to do those things which were called sins but
not sin.[30] The source is hardly impartial but Davis should not
have ignored it. Baptist evidence, though limited and heterogen-
eous, does not support the thesis of the Ranter myth as an
instrument of sectarian consolidation. The records of the Fenstan-
ton church do not attempt to discredit backsliders as Ranters.
They describe dissident enthusiasts employing Ranter positions
to reject the authority of church and Scripture. They are rarely
labelled "Ranters", their common offence being "forsaking the
assembly of the saints".[31] There are no good grounds for doubting
the accuracy of the elders' record of the dissidents' beliefs. There
are no signs of a Ranter myth. The Fenstanton church-book is
consistent with the limited Baptist evidence in suggesting that
Ranter opinion was not uncommon within the sect during the
first years of the Interregnum. John Bunyan's lifelong obsession
with a Ranter threat, so assiduously documented by Christopher
Hill, may invite scepticism as an objective source for the survival
of the doctrine.[32] His autobiographical account of his early con-
tacts with Ranters cannot be so easily dismissed unless the genre
itself is discredited. In disposing of *The Lost Sheep Found*, Clark-
son's account of his spiritual pilgrimages, Davis effectively
declares early modern autobiography a useless source of reliable

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[28] George Fox and James Nayler, *A Word from the Lord* (London, 1654), T.C.,
E.809 (6), p. 13; George Fox, *A Declaration against All Professions and Professors*
(London, 1654), T.C., E.809 (8), pp. 3-7.

[29] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 47.

[30] Friends' Library, London, Samuel Watson MS. volume, pp. 162-3.

[31] McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters", p. 135.

[32] Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and
His Church* (Oxford, 1988).

information.[33] So he can ignore not only Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* but also George Fox's journal, abundant with references to Ranters and a radically different type of autobiography from Clarkson's. Some of the most fertile and challenging sources for the Ranters are dismissed out of hand.

There is no evidence for a Ranter myth outside the domestic politics of Restoration Quakerism. Well before the yellow journalists exploited the Moor Lane trials the "Ranter" sobriquet was commonly employed to describe the principles and practices of Coppe, Clarkson and their followers. The Ranter sensation was no different in nature and effect from a series of campaigns against Brownists, antinomians, Anabaptists, Seekers and Quakers. If Davis's thesis has no validity then neither do the criteria by which he interprets the evidence. The presumption of a Ranter myth allows him to dismiss most of the sources as hostile or self-serving, as in the case of autobiographies. Those which do not fit these categories can be discounted for the lack of neutral corroboration. He does not define neutrality nor reveal what ideal of an impartial source would convince him that the Ranters existed. Some awkward sources evade his attention. The evidence documented by the heresiographer Thomas Edwards that Thomas Webbe held opinions of a Ranter type as early as 1645 was investigated by the House of Lords. Davis ignores its report.[34] Winstanley's two tracts of 1650 are perfunctorily dismissed as anti-Ranter though they appeared before the Ranter myth was supposedly manufactured.[35] Davis's thesis is superficially plausible because it exploits the ambiguity of much of the evidence. Many sources cannot be taken at face value because they reflected current usage and linguistic restraints, not a mythical fantasy. The term "Ranterism", like "Quakerism", first became current among Restoration Friends. In the 1650s "Ranting", used substantively and adjectivally, described both doctrine and discipline. It was also applied indiscriminately to ungodly and profane behaviour, to popular revels and a good night at the tavern. Diggers and Quakers used the term to characterize the antithesis of Creator Reason and the inner light. Analysing the disparate sources

[33] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 64. My reservations about Quaker autobiographies, which Davis notes, refer to their evidence for Seekers, not Ranters: McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters", p. 128.

[34] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 115-16, 126-9; Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena*, i, 2nd edn. (London, 1646), pp. 21, 86-7, 106-7; *Lords Jls.*, vii, pp. 71, 80-1.

[35] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 40, 47.

with these qualifications in mind may render much of the evidence
unreliable, but it remains the sensible conclusion that there were
advocates of practical antinomianism called "Ranters" in England
during the Interregnum.[36] The myth is Davis's own creation.

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[36] I shall attempt to assess the significance of the sources for Ranters in a forthcoming book.

II

In "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", in *Past
and Present*, J. C. Davis replied to the many reviewers unmoved
by his earlier *Fear, Myth and History*.[1] He argued there that the
Ranters of the mid-seventeenth century had been merely a fig-
ment of the imagination, "a projection of deviance" by frightened
conservative pamphleteers.[2] In the 1970s, he went on, the
phantom was resurrected by historians linked with the Commun-
ist Party Historians' Group, eager to see English history fit a
Marxist framework.[3]

J. C. Davis now expresses, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, pained
surprise at the furore his book has provoked. He rebukes his
critics, with some asperity, for their "bad work" in the past and
their failure to recognize the truth set before them.[4] His present
essay is unlikely to convince the sceptics, however, for it relies
on a selective and suspect reading of the evidence. Davis focuses
on three central issues: the significance of the Blasphemy Act of
1650, the social categorization of the Ranters, and the beliefs of
Abiezer Coppe and other so-called "core" writers. I shall take
each of these briefly in turn. I shall not deal with his "discovery"
that the Ranters were resurrected by Marxist historians. He
repeats this claim in the essay but ignores the cogent answers
already published by Gerald Aylmer and Christopher Hill.[5]

[1] J. C. Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", *Past and Present*, no. 129 (Nov. 1990), pp. 79-103; J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986).
[2] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, ch. 5; Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 82.
[3] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 129-37; Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 82.
[4] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", pp. 82-3, 103.
[5] G. E. Aylmer, "Did the Ranters Exist?", *Past and Present*, no. 117 (Nov. 1987), pp. 210-11; Christopher Hill, "Abolishing the Ranters", in his *A Nation of Change*

Davis's interpretation of the Blasphemy Act (not Ordinance) of 9 August 1650 is untenable. His claim that it was not directed against the Ranters is contradicted by the *Commons Journals*, which show that it emerged from a committee set up to investigate the "abominable Practices of a Sect called Ranters" and bring in a Bill against them.[6] Coppe and Laurence Clarkson appeared before the committee, and Coppe indeed claimed that "The two Acts of May 10. [against swearing] and Aug. 9. 1650 were put out because of me".[7] The act's failure to identify Ranters — or any other group — by name has no significance; the Rump preferred to outlaw doctrines rather than possibly transient groups. In the event the measure served mainly as a deterrent; the leading Ranters had been punished and cowed before it came into force.[8]

Davis turns next to the problem of how to categorize the Ranters. Historians are agreed that it is wrong to speak of a Ranter sect or movement. Organized sects were slow to emerge in the religious confusion of the late 1640s. In his book Davis recognized the possibility of loose groupings as well as isolated individuals and organized sects,[9] but this key point then drops from sight. In his essay he unfairly pillories any use of the "Ranter" label as "retrospective sectarianizing".[10] He appears to have adopted a conceptual framework which allows only for the polarized categories of flux and the fully developed sect.[11]

Davis can find no trace of organization or ideological coherence among the Ranters. He charges critics (myself among them) with begging the question of how much historians should expect to

(n. 5 cont.)

and *Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1990), pp. 186-8.

[6] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 81; Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 19, 54. Davis uses "act" and "ordinance" interchangeably.

[7] *Commons Jls.*, vi, pp. 423-4, 427, 430, 437, 440, 443, 444, 453-4, 493; Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 59, 77. Cf. Aylmer, "Did the Ranters Exist?", p. 212; Abiezer Coppe, *A Remonstrance of the Sincere and Zealous Protestation of Abiezer Coppe* (London, 1651), in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century*, ed. Nigel Smith (London, 1983), p. 119. This is now the most widely accessible source for the key pamphlets, and I have used it throughout here.

[8] Coppe was gaoled for twenty months, Clarkson was imprisoned and banished (though that part of the sentence was not enforced), Jacob Bauthumley was bored through the tongue, and Joseph Salmon was held in prison at Coventry.

[9] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 43-4.

[10] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 90.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 90-4.

find in a seventeenth-century grouping.[12] The Fifth Monarchists, on whom I worked many years ago, are suggestive in this context.[13] Evolving out of the diffuse millenarian ideas of the 1640s, the Fifth Monarchists were never a sect. They differed sharply over soteriorology, the sacraments, the sabbath, political and social issues, and the nature and timing of the millennium. Links between the groups were often flimsy, and personal animosities could run high. Yet they felt some sense of collective identity, and contemporaries recognized an ideological core in their self-appointed mission to hasten the millennium.

Christopher Hill has shown in "Abolishing the Ranters", published since Davis's essay went to press, that the Ranter phenomenon was not dissimilar.[14] In the 1640s antinomian and spiritualist ideas surfaced in many areas, probably independently. In 1649-50 they began to appear in print, sometimes accompanied by deliberately outrageous behaviour, and this development persuaded the authorities that a Ranter "sect" had emerged. Though "sect" in its modern sense is not the right word, it is clear that something had crystallized from the flux, and that we are no longer dealing with isolated individuals. At the very least, we must speak of groups, not individuals. Both Coppe and Clarkson had associates, whose meetings quickly became notorious. Jacob Bauthumley too tells us that his work, *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (1650), expressed the views of a "Generation of Men and Woemen in the World", not merely his own. And Hill gives numerous examples of contemporaries encountering *groups* they regarded as Ranters.[15] Moreover ties clearly existed between several of these groups, or at least their leaders. When Joseph Salmon wrote from Coventry to his protégé Thomas Webbe in Wiltshire, he declared, in a striking pun, "Thou art the Webb of my own spinning, I have laboured to bring thee forth in this glorious form that thou now livest". He referred to their mutual friend Abiezer Coppe as "Cop, my, thy own hart".[16] All that Davis rather

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[13] Bernard Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (London, 1972). In "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 99, Davis confuses the Fifth Monarchist John Rogers with his Victorian editor, Edward.
[14] Hill, "Abolishing the Ranters", pp. 152-94. This is a much-revised version of an essay with the same title to which Davis does respond in "Fear, Myth and Furore".
[15] Jacob Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (London, 1650), in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 229; Hill, "Abolishing the Ranters", *passim*.
[16] Joseph Salmon, letter to Webbe, 3 Apr. 1650, in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 201.

grudgingly concedes from these dramatic phrases is that "Salmon knew Webbe and could assume that he knew Coppe".[17] That is inadequate, and suggests a readiness to brush aside inconvenient evidence. Has Davis become the prisoner of his own thesis? We find Coppe writing with equal warmth to his "dearest Mr Salmon" at Coventry, addressing him as "My Quintessence, my heart, and soule, my sal, and sol".[18] Coppe and Clarkson were admittedly never close, but some links existed between their groups too.[19] And if ties between Ranter groups were often loose, the same was true of Fifth Monarchists, Diggers and indeed early Quakers.

In the final section of his essay Davis turns from organization to ideology, asking whether the Ranters possessed sufficient intellectual coherence to warrant any collective label.[20] Clearly we should demand some measure of shared ideas and attitudes among the so-called Ranter core, if less than within a developed sect. Davis finds none, even in his "core" pamphleteers (Coppe, Clarkson, Bauthumley and perhaps Salmon), and insists that it is wrong to associate any of them with antinomian liberation.[21] How convincing is his case?

Jacob Bauthumley is easily the most promising subject for revisionism. He upheld traditional moral values. But he also insisted that "sin" could not offend God, for it resulted merely from God not having manifested himself fully to the sinner. It was "a nullity", "the dark side of God which is a meere privation of light".[22] While accepting traditional morality, Bauthumley was undermining its theological foundation. Turning to another of the "core" pamphleteers, Davis quotes a comment by Jerome Friedman that Salmon's treatment of sin "could carry orthodox intent if not inspected too vigorously". This ignores Friedman's point that it is *only* by not looking closely that we could stumble

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[17] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 29; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 32-3.
[18] Abiezer Coppe, letter to Salmon and Wyke, n.d., in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 117. On the radicals' use of puns and imagery, see Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1989), esp. pp. 296-8.
[19] Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (London, 1660), in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, pp. 180-1.
[20] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", pp. 92-5.
[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.
[22] *Ibid.*; Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, ed. Smith, pp. 243-4.

into such an error.[23] Salmon himself stated in his recantation that
he had formerly delighted in everything "vile and ugly", and
that his *Divinity Anatomized* (now lost) had rejected sin or made
God its author.[24] In Clarkson's case Davis concedes that we come
close to the Ranter stereotype. *A Single Eye All Light*, published
in 1650, declared that the enlightened were liberated from sin,
and that "till acted that so called Sin, thou art not delivered from
the power of sin". In the case of adultery, he owned, "till I acted
that, so-called sin, I could not predominate over sin".[25] Davis
does not deny the promiscuity of Clarkson and his associates,
though he seeks to minimize it.[26] He prefers to emphasize the
gulf between Clarkson and Coppe, arguing that *A Single Eye All
Light* showed none of Coppe's passion for social justice. In Clark-
son's moral vacuum, he avers, malice and avarice were as neutral
as adultery.[27] But he fails to note that *A Single Eye All Light*
concerned itself exclusively with the "sins" of drunkenness, adul-
tery and theft, and that Clarkson was careful to endorse only
actions committed "in light and love".[28] *A Single Eye All Light*
was moreover limited in scope, and there is no reason to assume
that it represented the whole of Clarkson's thinking. He had
already expressed his social concern, forcefully, in earlier writ-
ings.[29] His initial sympathy with Gerrard Winstanley's Digger
experiment suggests that he shared Coppe's sense of the unity of
all creation, and his communal ethic.[30]

Davis devotes most space to Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll*, which
he sees as "the central text at issue in the current debate".[31]
Here we have some measure of agreement. Coppe did have a

[23] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 95; see Jerome Friedman, *Blasphemy,
Immorality and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution* (Athens, Ohio, 1987),
p. 154.
[24] Joseph Salmon, *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights* (London, 1651), in
Collection of Ranter Writings, ed. Smith, pp. 214-15, 221.
[25] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 95; cf. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*,
pp. 58-75; Laurence Clarkson, *A Single Eye All Light* (London, 1650), in *Collection
of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, pp. 170-3.
[26] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 71-4.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[28] Clarkson, *Single Eye All Light*, ed. Smith, pp. 169-71.
[29] Barry Reay, "Laurence Clarkson: An Artisan and the English Revolution", in
Christopher Hill, Barry Reay and William Lamont (eds.), *The World of the Muggletoni-
ans* (London, 1983), pp. 173-6; Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy*,
pp. 108-14; cf. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 60-1.
[30] Clarkson, *Lost Sheep Found*, ed. Smith, p. 182; cf. Davis, *Fear, Myth and His-
tory*, pp. 70-1.
[31] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 84.

passionate desire "to free the moral substance of Christianity from a contemporary obsession with forms or petty morals", which led him to proclaim a religion of universal love and communal sharing.[32] Thus far we agree. Davis goes on to argue that Coppe's extravagant rhetoric signified no more than a wish "to rearrange the priorities of moral judgement". Leaving the poor to starve was the most heinous sin, but swearing and promiscuity remained sinful too.[33] There are passages in *A Fiery Flying Roll* which might bear such a reading, and Davis makes good use of them. But many others, passed over in silence, show that Coppe's mission went much further: he believed the enlightened must act out sin to confound the hypocrites. He formerly regarded such militants as devils incarnate, he tells us, but had come to see them as angels in human form, however shocking their behaviour.[34] Davis believes there is no "reliable evidence that Coppe ever engaged in these practical antinomian activities".[35] That ignores Coppe's own testimony that he had been "infected" with a "plague of Swearing", after twenty-seven years of scrupulous self-restraint.[36] It also ignores his visit to the gypsy women gaoled in Southwark, where by his own account he "clip't, hug'd and kiss'd them, putting my hand in their bosomes, loving the she-Gipsies dearly". "I can if it be my will", he insisted, "kisse and hug Ladies, and love my neighbours wife as my selfe, without sin".[37]

Coppe acknowledged that such things were base. But it was by base actions that the formal Christian must be shocked out of blindness and complacency. He "must first lose all his righteousnesse, every bit of his holinesse, and every crum of his Religion, and be plagued and confounded (by base things) into nothing".[38] That had been Coppe's own road to enlightenment. "My plaguy, filthy, nasty holinesse hathe been confounded by base things", he recalled, "and thereby have I been confounded into eternall Majesty, unspeakable glory, my life, my self".[39] For

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
[34] Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (London, 1649), in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, p. 91.
[35] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 96.
[36] Abiezer Coppe, *Copp's Return to the Wayes of Truth* (London, 1651), in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, pp. 141-2.
[37] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, ed. Smith, pp. 106-7.
[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

base things were only a means to an end, not an end in themselves; hence the explicit preference for coarse gypsy women over beautiful ladies.[40] Coppe's ultimate goal was spiritual, to be "carried up into the arms of my love, which is invisible glory, eternall Majesty, purity it self, unspotted beauty, even that beauty which maketh all other beauty but meer uglinesse, when set against it". "Though also I have concubines without number", he added, "which I cannot be without, yet this is my spouse, my love, my dove, my fair one".[41]

Coppe chose to speak in riddles and by hints.[42] How literally are we to take his "concubines without number"? The scale of his self-confessed "abominable" actions can never be known, but it is plain that he did indulge in language and behaviour intended to confound the Puritan godly. He tells us that he was moved to manifest his spiritual insights in deeds as well as words. The "notorious businesse" of the gypsies, as he called it, was only one of many dramatic and self-dramatizing "exploits".[43] John Dury, the preacher, told him sternly that "in respect of the publick and noted manner of your failings, you ought proportionably to make your humiliation the more publick and notable".[44]

The Blasphemy Act was thus right to focus on practical antinomianism and the notion of God as universal spirit. The leading Ranters, even Bauthumley, did share a conviction that sexual promiscuity and blasphemy were not offensive to God. Clarkson and Bauthumley rejected a personal deity responsive to prayer or human actions of any kind. Bauthumley thought of God as an infinite, immutable spirit who "hath his Being no where else out of the Creatures". God as spirit did not and could not speak "to men, but in men".[45] Similarly Coppe, while never attempting a systematic theology, spoke of a God "dwelling in, and shining through" himself, "my most excellent Majesty in me".[46] In *Copp's Return*, his recantation, he confessed to having taught that God existed only in his creatures.[47]

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 107; cf. p. 108.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 97, 105.
[44] Coppe, *Copp's Return*, ed. Smith, p. 147.
[45] Clarkson, *Single Eye All Light*, ed. Smith, pp. 174-5; Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, ed. Smith, pp. 231-2.
[46] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, ed. Smith, pp. 80-3.
[47] Coppe, *Copp's Return*, ed. Smith, p. 140.

Davis ends his essay by sketching an intellectual context for the Ranter pamphleteers. He links them, rightly, with Winstanley and William Walwyn.[48] His wish to place them in the context of a "Protestant, biblicist Christianity" and the tradition of "Protestant adiaphora" is much less persuasive.[49] Though scornful of outward forms, Coppe and Bauthumley used "Protestant" as a term of abuse,[50] and they all saw Protestant *sola fideism* as the essence of the hypocrisy they despised. Davis's suggestion that their provocative behaviour was intended to "moderate the passions of party" would have astonished contemporaries.[51] Coppe certainly despised squabbles over outward forms, but moderation is not the quality his language and behaviour call readily to mind. He expected to see all the churches annihilated in the apocalypse he warned was at hand, and he rejoiced at the prospect.[52]

Davis's work has been useful in pointing out substantial differences between the pamphleteers. But the evidence does not support his attempt to write the Ranters out of existence. The Rump and other contemporaries knew better, and historians have been right to follow them. The Ranters were not a sect but a number of groups, some loosely linked, with related and alarming ideas on the nature of God and on sin. Their emergence galvanized the Rump into a rare display of speedy, determined and effective action.

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[48] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 101.
[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2.
[50] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, ed. Smith, p. 113; Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, ed. Smith, p. 247.
[51] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 102.
[52] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, ed. Smith, pp. 109-16.

III

In "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", in *Past and Present*, J. C. Davis confesses that he wants to "offer an assessment of the reaction" to his 1986 publication, *Fear, Myth and History*, and "more positively, to suggest closer approximations to the questions being asked and the problems being set" by the contentious "Ranters".[1] In this short response I should

[1] J. C. Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", *Past and Present*, no. 129 (Nov. 1990), pp. 79-103, at pp. 79-80; J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986).

like to indicate what seems to me to be a fundamental and unacknowledged flaw in Davis's method, a flaw common to his book and his article. Had Davis not manifested this shortcoming, I believe that *Fear, Myth and History* would not have been written as it was, nor the response to it have been as it has. The debate has become bogged down, and new horizons must be found.

First of all, let no one doubt that Davis is a historian of considerable talent and achievement. He has a particular skill in untangling rather complex theological knots. I have benefited greatly from his work on the Levellers and Christianity and on utopias. In *Fear, Myth and History* there are two very important moments: the presentation of Richard Coppin not as an antinomian but a free-will perfectionist, and Abiezer Coppe not as an antinomian but as an "anti-formalist".[2] These are significant clarifications: the last two are especially valuable for the way they demonstrate how lazily the term "antinomian" has been used by historians in the past. Arguments for the role of stereotypes in enhancing social control and sectarian discipline, so that the image of the Ranter becomes a means of maintaining the integrity of other sects, are equally important, although not entirely original.[3]

Davis is a very good splitter of religious identities, but too good to survive as a successful historian without also displaying some capacity to lump together apparently disparate identities in significant relationships. The root of the problem lies in how the evidence required to establish these relationships of similarity and difference is to be sought. Nowhere (in a substantial sense, *really* nowhere) in *Fear, Myth and History* or in "Fear, Myth and Furore" does Davis ever juxtapose the hostile images of Ranters (collective or individual), and the shifty, nebulous writings of so-called "Ranters", with any unprinted evidence relating to any of the individuals who are so-called "Ranters". In the absence of evidence of a "Ranter organization" in the printed tracts and news-books, it was not difficult to argue that the Ranters did not exist, especially given that the printed opinions of those labelled "Ranters" (but who never called themselves "Ranters") bore little or no relationship to the image of the Ranter in the hostile press.

As I have said elsewhere, arguing that a movement did not

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[2] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 37, 52.
[3] See Michael Hunter, "The Problem of Atheism in Early Modern England", *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., xxxv (1985), pp. 135-7.

exist still leaves the individuals themselves, the personal histories which made up their lives, and the histories and identities of the collective activities in which they engaged.[4] If the pamphlets and news-books themselves do not provide the answers, is it not time to look elsewhere? Yet at this point Davis stopped, preferring instead to lay the blame for the "creation" of the Ranters at the feet of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Why should this have been so? Was it because the book was written mostly in New Zealand (I suppose), where microfilms of Thomason and Wing are available, but where there are no relevant archives?

Davis begins his self-defence in "Fear, Myth and Furore" with an historiographical survey of the general view of mid-seventeenth-century radicalism which he first assumed and then challenged in writing his book. According to this view, the Ranters were rebelling against the doctrine of sin which was being used as a form of internalized discipline by the "groups or classes who came to power in the English Revolution".[5] To start here is a mistake for, despite the acuity of much of the exposition which follows, we are still left with the problem of finding a history for "the people hitherto called Ranters". Instead, Davis entraps himself in the matters of interpretation which have so marked *Fear, Myth and History*, and in doing so becomes even more ensnared in the objections of his opponents.

Throughout "Fear, Myth and Furore" Davis relies on *a priori* categories to organize his material. *A priori* categories are of course important in most forms of analysis, but they do have the effect of blinkering Davis's perceptions just where he is most in need of unhindered vision.

At the limit of Davis's horizon of perception we have this: "The discussion here has been confused by the failure to distinguish two lines of argument which have developed in parallel since the early 1970s. One of these has depicted the Ranters as a diffuse 'group', possessed of minimal social or intellectual articulation. The other line of argument insists on a small core group with reasonably consistent, shared ideas. The case for the former — a Ranter 'milieu' — has recently been restated. For a new defence of the latter we must await McGregor's anticipated

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[4] Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 8-9, n. 27.

[5] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 80.

book on the Ranters".[6] Quite apart from the fact that one can easily find a sensitive and informed combination of both approaches in Ranter historiography of the past twenty years, the real problem in this passage is the blatant buck-passing. I am eagerly looking forward to McGregor's book too, but that does not stop me from thinking freshly about the problem, rather than in tight reaction to the views expressed in earlier historical accounts. Nor should it stop Davis.

What, for instance, do we know about Abiezer Coppe? His history is well known: a poor background in Warwick, then Oxford, no degree, a rapid passage through Presbyterianism to being a Baptist preacher in the army, then a "falling off ordinances" to become a "Seeker", then a "Ranter", imprisonment, (presumably) enforced recantation, a brief flirt with John Pordage the Behmenist, then obscurity in Surrey until his death in 1672. What more have we learned about Coppe since the work of McGregor, Morton and Hill? Anne Hughes has found Coppe under Presbyterian patronage in Warwick in the 1630s.[7] The specific references come in the diary of the Presbyterian schoolmaster Thomas Dugard.[8] In this diary is to be found further evidence of Coppe's precociousness at an early age: he visited Dugard after dinner to read Homer and the recently published sacred epigrams of Richard Crashaw in Latin. Another example of recently recovered information would be the letter in the Clarke papers at Worcester College from Coppe to Salmon and Wyke, written during the imprisonment of the Ranters.[9]

The references in Dugard's diary constitute highly interesting information. They help to explain the linguistic ingenuity of some of Coppe's later modes of criticism, and give the lie to the assumption that Ranters (and sectarians generally) were unlearned. Coppe's letter demonstrates communication between the so-called core "Ranters" at the height of the so-called "Ranter" period, evidence which Davis, in *Fear, Myth and History*, says does not exist. Both pieces of evidence add to our picture of the "core" group, and of one of its members in particu-

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[7] Anne Hughes, *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 72, n. 86.
[8] British Library, London, Add. MS. 23146, fos. 31^v, 92^v-96^r.
[9] Worcester College, Oxford, Clarke MS. 18, fo. 24, in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century*, ed. Nigel Smith (London, 1983), p. 117.

lar, expanding our ability to construct a biography from a number
of different types of source.

Davis appears reluctant to try to find new evidence on the
Ranters, perhaps in different kinds of sources, as a means of
building a new, alternative and convincing picture. So much of
Fear, Myth and History seems to trawl through well-charted seas
that one has the impression of Davis not as a historian but as a
practiser of the art of pure hermeneutics.

At the end of "Fear, Myth and Furore", Davis gives a summary
of what the writing of the so-called "Ranters" really means. He
does not attempt to re-imagine the meanings and identities of
statements from different forms of evidence. Rather, "Fear, Myth
and Furore" ends with the offering of an agenda: "the argument
should surely be about how best to locate figures such as Coppe,
Bauthumley, Clarkson and the rest in an appropriate and illumin-
ating contemporary context". This would include neither "anti-
nomian liberation from moral constraints" nor "coming to terms
with a pantheistic divinity loosed from Scripture", but "the
context of an anti-formalism which embraced Neoplatonic strains,
the tradition of Protestant adiaphora and a scripturally based
providentialism", as well as the "emphasis on the charity of
practical Christianity".[10] What worries me here is that Davis
should call for the study of this area when there is a long and
distinguished tradition of such investigations which goes back at
least to the early years of this century.[11] Judging from his refer-
ences in his most recent work (especially his widespread use of
G. F. Nuttall's works), it is almost as if he has only just discovered
this literature himself.[12] Clarkson's *A Single Eye All Light* (1650)
is identified, as it was in *Fear, Myth and History*, as the work
which "comes closest to the antinomian pantheism required of
the Ranter type", but "this work needs to be re-examined in the

[10] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 101.
[11] See for example Theodor Sippell, *Zur Vorgeschichte des Quäkertums* (Giessen,
1920); Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*
(New York, 1914); Rufus M. Jones, *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Common-
wealth* (New York, 1932); Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and
Experience* (Oxford, 1946); Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *James Nayler: A Fresh Approach*
(London, 1954); Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Welsh Saints, 1640-1660* (Cardiff, 1957);
R. Tudur Jones, "The Healing Herb and the Rose of Love: The Piety of Two Welsh
Puritans", in R. Buick Knox (ed.), *Reformation, Continuity and Dissent* (London,
1977).
[12] See J. C. Davis, "Cromwell's Religion", in John Morrill (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell
and the English Revolution* (London, 1990), pp. 181-208.

light of the growth in the 1640s of an interest in mysticism and the work of Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Boehme in particular".[13] This has already been done in published secondary literature.

The most striking omission from Davis's account of Coppe's writing and his behaviour is a consideration of the use of gesture. The descriptions of dancing with gypsies, putting hands in their bosoms, kissing them, is a textual (and, if it ever really happened, a behavioural) manifestation of the "universal love" which exists between all humans. Such gestures, whether encountered in actuality or on the printed page, must have looked like depravity to anyone who did not understand Coppe. Coppe certainly did invert the moral priorities of the formalists, but it will not do to say, as Davis does, that he simply "does not release us from priorities of moral performance".[14] Rather, Coppe's imagination and practice operate in entirely different realms from those in which Davis imagines he moves. Davis assumes that the *way* in which people speak or act is a transparent medium for their ideas. It takes little perusal of Coppe's writing to realize that this cannot have been the case: the medium is as much the message. And although Coppe's anti-formalism certainly has much to do with the context of the other anti-formalists mentioned,[15] as Davis claims, this does not discount the existence of a phase of anti-formalism in 1649-50 in which the indwelling God in the individual urges the sharing of money and all material goods in the name of a realized perfect society. Neither does it discount the fact that this antiformalism was expressed and communicated in a bizarre language of gestures and prophetic postures which were indeed shared briefly by a few individuals, as Coppe's letter to Salmon and Wyke seems to imply. We have come full circle to what were called "Ranters" in the old days, but seen, I believe, from their point of view as well as from that of hostile outsiders.

These are my main comments. One can observe in consequence some minor inconsistencies in "Fear, Myth and Furore". Davis correctly made a strong case in *Fear, Myth and History* for the changing nature of the views of individual sectarians; it is therfore surprising to find him sometimes making claims for their consistency. Davis maintains that Coppe did not treat Scripture allegoric-

[13] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 102.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

ally but in fact very literally.[16] This may be true of one aspect of
A Fiery Flying Roll, but it does not take account of the allegorizing
present in *Some Sweet Sips, of Some Spiritual Wine*, or of the
personification of scriptural figures (especially the harlot) in *A
Second Fiery Flying Roule*. Both literal and allegorical processes
are at work in Coppe, with different emphases and combinations
at different times, and in different texts. It is our job to work out
why these configurations occurred after we have understood how
they are operating.

By the same token, I remain unconvinced that Bauthumley did
not exhibit an attitude which looks like pantheism. Regrettably,
Davis does not prove his point, but simply refers to someone
else's work, giving the reader no opportunity to make an objective
assessment.[17]

On a procedural level there seems to be a confusion between
the mistaking of anti-Ranter propaganda for Ranter views (where
Fear, Myth and History has its sharpest focus), and the inevitability
of using names. There is a zeal against naming in Davis's writing
which fails to consider the different contexts in which labelling
occurs. Are we really to take John Carey to task for using the
word "sect" of the "Ranters" in a *Sunday Times* book review of
Hill's biography of Bunyan?[18] I hardly think so, or our world
will become like the cumbersome, silent nightmare of the third
book of *Gulliver's Travels*, where the scientist-courtiers of the
floating island of Laputa *carry* the objects to which they wish to
refer, for fear of misnaming them. Davis does not take seriously
the accusation that he is a nominalist, although it would be well
worth doing so. Instead, there is a simple rebuttal in a flurry of
self-righteous chaff.[19]

It certainly seems worrying to me, and perhaps also indicative
of a *naïveté* of method, when Davis claims that he is free of the
crime of putting theory before his evidence in a dominant but
hampering position, and that instead he is genuinely engaged in
a "pragmatic dialectic between theory, sources and conclusions".
If he were, "Fear, Myth and Furore", would be very different;
instead, just as the preceding book did, it continues to put theory
before evidence in so far as it is still concerned with interpretative

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 91. See also J. C. Davis, "Puritanism and Revolution: Themes,
Categories, Methods and Conclusions", *Hist. Jl.*, xxxiii (1990), pp. 693-704.
[19] Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore", p. 89.

theories. I remain convinced that the material in *Fear, Myth and History* is the kind of propaedeutic necessary for thinking through the grounds for reinvestigating and re-researching a familiar historical phenomenon and set of explanations. It is half a book, and the rest still has to be written. That Davis finishes by raising questions to which some of the answers already exist in a tradition of historical writing is puzzling. Because I believe that "Fear, Myth and Furore" does not answer what I consider to be the most fundamental criticisms which could be made of *Fear, Myth and History* (and which I have outlined above), I confess to finding it an often negative contribution to a debate with a flourishing existence elsewhere and sometimes in other disciplines.

There are still many questions which the history of seventeenth-century radicalism and nonconformity will bear. The ways in which we can answer them, especially in terms of the different types of evidence we can find, should continue to tax us. Good examples of this would be recent work on the social origins and relative wealth of Dissenters, and the investigation of "levelling" sentiment in mining communities. Further information on the histories of individual Ranters would form part of this picture. *Fear, Myth and History* has made me think hard, and it is in many ways a work of real force but, in ten years time, to what extent will we see it as a distraction?

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IV

In the light of J. C. Davis's recent work,[1] it may seem contentious to seek a coherent body of thought linking those usually designated as Ranters, let alone to extend this body of thought to

[1] J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986); J. C. Davis, "Fear, Myth and Furore: Reappraising the 'Ranters'", *Past and Present*, no. 129 (Nov. 1990), pp. 79-103. The historiographical tradition attacked by Davis includes such works as Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Paladin edn., London, 1970); Norman Cohn, "The Ranters: The 'Underground' in England of 1650", *Encounter*, xxxiv no. 4 (1970), pp. 15-25; A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters* (London, 1970); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1972); *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century*, ed. Nigel Smith (London, 1983). Jerome Friedman's *Blasphemy,*

Winstanley and the Diggers. It is not proposed here to defend the existence of a group or sect called "Ranters", nor even of a "movement" if that movement is characterized as a "materialistic" or "rationalistic" counter-cultural rejection of the Protestant ethic. Davis is undoubtedly correct in asserting that "the Ranters" were largely a fabrication, and that some individuals usually so called (John Robins and William Franklin, for example) have no connection with the ideas of such writers as Coppin, Coppe and so on. Robins and Franklin were claiming a special messianic status for themselves; the status to which people like Coppe pretended was at most prophetic. It is because of its indiscriminate use by contemporaries and later historians that the word "Ranter" is best avoided; it groups together individuals who clearly do not belong together.

The force of Davis's argument should be recognized. It would nevertheless be wrong to conclude that none of the so-called "Ranters" can be linked together in any way other than as victims of a moral panic. If sense is to be made out of the Ranter phenomenon, it is necessary to go beyond the polarization of the current debate. If the sources are approached from a slightly different angle than at present, it can be established that certain of the "Ranters" did share a common ideology, marking them off from such radicals as the Levellers and Fifth Monarchists, and uniting them as a historically significant movement. This statement applies specifically to Bauthumley, Coppe, Clarkson, Tany, Salmon, Coppin, the anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* and George Foster. The ideology of this group was also substantially that of Gerrard Winstanley, something which is obscured by using the word "Ranter".[2] At the most general

(n. 1 cont.)

Immorality and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution (Athens, Ohio, 1987) appeared after Davis's book, but shares most of the errors, real or supposed, attacked by Davis. J. F. McGregor holds a special place in Davis's account in having recognized that much of the Ranter phenomenon was a projection; like Moses, McGregor saw the promised land of historical truth from afar, but never quite reached it: see J. F. McGregor, "The Ranters, 1649-1660" (Univ. of Oxford B.Litt. thesis, 1968); J. F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters", in J. F. McGregor and Barry Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 121-39.

. [2] Winstanley's religion is itself a matter of debate. See Paul Elman, "The Theological Basis of Digger Communism", *Church Hist.*, xxiii (1954), pp. 207-18; George Juretic, "Digger No Millenarian: The Revolutionising of Gerrard Winstanley", *Jl. Hist. Ideas*, xxxvi (1975), pp. 263-80; C. H. George, "Gerrard Winstanley: A Critical Retrospect", in C. Robert Cole and Michael E. Moody (eds.), *The Dissenting Tradition: Essays for Leland H. Carlson* (Athens, Ohio, 1975), pp. 191-225; Lotte Mulligan, John K.

level, all these writers were spiritualists in the sense of emphasizing the indwelling of God. Their spiritualism was, moreover, indebted to the German spiritualist tradition, which was in turn heavily indebted to alchemy, Cabala and Hermeticism.[3] What distinguishes them from other occult-minded spiritualists (John Everard, for example) is the extent of their social radicalism and their extreme hostility to the externals of religion.[4]

There is nothing particularly new in asserting the connection between Winstanley's thought and that of some of the supposed Ranters, although the depth of this connection is not generally appreciated. Christopher Hill, for example, has already suggested

(n. 2 cont.)
Graham and Judith Richards, "Winstanley: A Case for the Man as He Said He Was", *Jl. Eccles. Hist.*, xxviii (1977), pp. 57-75; Christopher Hill, *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (Past and Present Supplement, no. 5, Oxford, 1978); G. E. Aylmer, "The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley", in McGregor and Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, pp. 91-119; Nicola Baxter, "Gerrard Winstanley's Experimental Knowledge of God (The Perception of the Spirit and the Acting of Reason)", *Jl. Eccles. Hist.*, xxxix (1988), pp. 184-201.
[3] The relationship between German and English spiritualism is dealt with in Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2nd edn. (London, 1928). John Bossy recognizes the similarities between the two movements, but supposes some problem with the means of transmission of German spiritualist ideas to England, suggesting that these might rather be regarded "as spores secreted in a Christian culture, guaranteed to produce mushrooms at a certain temperature": John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1985), p. 110. Given that the Interregnum saw translations of the *Theologia Germanica*, works by Cusanus, Paracelsus, Weigel and Boehme, there seems little reason to think that English radicals did not encounter the German tradition: Jones, *Spiritual Reformers*, ch. 13; Serge Hutin, *Les disciples anglais de Jacob Boehme aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1960), chs. 2-3; Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1989), ch. 5. For Hermeticism in general, see Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964).
[4] John Everard shows no sign of social radicalism and believed it necessary to submit to outward ordinances; see for example John Everard, *Some Gospel-Treasures Opened* (London, 1653), T.C., E.1424-5, pp. 63, 179. Kees Bolle has observed that Renaissance mysticism was characterized by a respect for liturgical proprieties: Kees Bolle, "Structures of Renaissance Mysticism", in Robert S. Kinsman (ed.), *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 119-45, at pp. 123 ff. This was a characteristic shared by many seventeenth-century spiritualists. Despite his pastor's hostility, Jacob Boehme continued to participate in Lutheran services, and defended both baptism and Holy Communion in his *Of Christs Testaments*, trans. J. Sparrow (London, 1652), T.C., E.665 (4). Two of Boehme's later admirers, Francis Lee and William Law, were Nonjurors. Similarly, the Scottish Bourignonists "were all of the Episcopal party" and Jacobite in sympathy. G. D. Henderson, "Quietist Influence in Scotland", in G. D. Henderson (ed.), *Religious Life in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 220-31, at p. 229. For the political orientation of what might be called magisterial spiritualism in contrast to radical spiritualism, see Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London, 1978).

a number of parallels.[5] Moreover a proximity to Winstanley is one of the criteria employed by Davis for distancing Coppin, Bauthumley, Foster and Coppe from Ranterism.[6] The closer these figures come to Winstanley, the closer they come to each other; one of Davis's arguments against the existence of a "Ranter" movement in fact suggests the existence of some sort of movement. The question is, what sort?

To answer this question, it is first necessary to establish the shared ideological orientation of the writers under review. The basis of this orientation was their understanding of God as the "being of beings". This was an idea common in German spiritualist thought, ultimately deriving from the belief of the Rhenish mystics that there was "a little spark" of the divine at the centre of the soul.[7] "God is all in one", wrote Richard Coppin, "and so in every one; the same all which is in me, is in thee"; He is "the principal Fountain and being of all Beings".[8] Coppe agreed that "he is that (*Ens entium*) that being of beings".[9] God is "the Being and Life of all", according to the author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew*;[10] or, in Laurence Clarkson's words, "the Being and Operation of all things".[11] Winstanley thought that "whatsoever you see and hear, is but the breathings forth or declaration of an infinite being that was in them".[12] For Bauthumley, the soul "is God manifest in the flesh".[13] Thomas Tany believed that the soul was "the life of God, in the humane

[5] Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 206. Hill cites the use of the word "Reason" for God, the phrase "fellow creature", and the belief that Christ's second coming would be spiritual.

[6] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 40, 47.

[7] For the relationship of Reformation spiritualism to medieval mysticism, see Alexandre Koyré, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme* (Paris, 1929), pp. 483 ff.; Alexandre Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes: Schwenckfeld, Séb. Franck, Weigel, Paracelse* (Paris, 1955); Steven E. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest* (New Haven, 1973).

[8] Richard Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, 3 pts. (London, 1649), T.C., E.574 (5), i, pp. 9, 22.

[9] Abiezer Coppe, *Copp's Return to the Wayes of Truth* (London, 1651), T.C., E.637 (4), p. 6.

[10] *A Justification of the Mad Crew* (London, 1650), p. 17.

[11] Laurence Clarkson, *A Single Eye All Light* (London, 1650), T.C., E.614 (1), sig. A2^r.

[12] Gerrard Winstanley, *Truth Lifting Up Its Head above Scandals* (London, 1649), in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. George H. Sabine (Ithaca, 1941), pp. 99-146, at p. 134.

[13] Jacob Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (London, 1650), T.C., E.1353 (2), p. 49.

body".[14] "To ascend from variety into uniformity", Joseph Salmon tells us, "is to contract our scattered spirits into their original center and to finde our selves where we were, before we were".[15]

The idea that God is the being of beings is not necessarily unorthodox;[16] the stress that the spiritualists placed on it was. Their emphasis on the immanence of God led to expressions of apparent pantheism. Coppin taught that God "is before all things, and is all things, and is the end of all things".[17] Coppe called Him "that eternal unity who is all, and in all".[18] "There is in reality but one thing", said Tany, "and that one thing is God".[19] Salmon thought that God was "that secret blood, breath, & life, that silently courseth through the hidden veins and close arteries of the whole creation".[20] For Winstanley, "The Creation of Fire, Water, Earth and Air, came out of him, and is his clothing".[21] The author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* seems to leave little doubt as to his own pantheism: "Every creature that moves in the Earth and under the Earth, in the Sea and in the Firmament above, is the seat of God, contains him, hugs him, embraces him, nay is really and truly God, even the living God".[22] The most celebrated example of this supposed pantheism is Bauthumley's assertion that "God is in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall".[23]

It is hardly surprising if their contemporaries believed that the radical spiritualists were pantheists. Historians have generally followed suit, adding for good measure that they were materialists as well, apparently on the unargued and unwarranted assumption that pantheism is necessarily materialist rather than idealist. Some historians have recognized Winstanley's belief in a God who was

[14] Thomas Tany, *Theauraujohn His Theous Ori Apokolipikal* (London, 1651), T.C., E.640 (8), p. 3.

[15] Joseph Salmon, *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights* (London, 1651), T.C., E.1361 (4), p. 3.

[16] Cf. Koyré, *Philosophie de Jacob Boehme*, pp. 484-5.

[17] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, i, pp. 1-2.

[18] Abiezer Coppe, "An Additional Preambular Hint", preface to Coppin's *Divine Teachings*, sig. A2ʳ.

[19] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Theous Ori Apokolipikal*, p. 19.

[20] Salmon, *Heights in Depths*, p. 38.

[21] Gerrard Winstanley, *A New-Yeers Gift for the Parliament and Armie* (London, 1650), in *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 353-96, at p. 374.

[22] *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, sig. A2ᵛ.

[23] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, p. 7.

both transcendent and immanent,[24] but most seem to interpret his understanding of divine immanence as implying pantheism. George Sabine thought that the only reason we cannot call Winstanley a pantheist is that he was not a "speculative metaphysician"; he did, however, recognize that Winstanley's religion "depends throughout on an idealist or spiritualist conception of nature and man".[25] Hill refers to "the materialistic side of Winstanley's pantheism",[26] and attributes to him the view that matter was not distinct from God on the basis of his acceptance of the Hermetic theory of creation *ex deo* rather than *ex nihilo*.[27] T. Wilson Hayes believes that Winstanley "breaks with the Manichaean dualism most mystics embrace", and that he "welcomed" the discovery that "everything spiritual is really material".[28] As for the Ranters, the nineteenth-century Quaker historian, Robert Barclay, thought that their "excesses were a natural result of the principles of pantheism".[29] Serge Hutin believed that Ranter pantheism could be traced back through medieval heresies to Gnosticism.[30] Hill asserts that Coppe and Salmon shared Winstanley's "materialist pantheism".[31] Cohn argued that Coppe "adopted the usual Neo-Platonic pantheism of the Free Spirit".[32] Davis, however, thinks that Coppe "was never a pantheist", but accepts that Bauthumley, Clarkson and the author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* were.[33]

As Alexandre Koyré has observed in connection with Sebastian Franck, "nothing is rarer in history than a genuine pantheism".[34] This is certainly true of the English radical spiritualists. Jerome Friedman is the only historian to recognize that what he takes to

[24] Mulligan, Graham and Richards, "Winstanley", *passim*; Baxter, "Gerrard Winstanley's Experimental Knowledge of God", pp. 195, 200.

[25] *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, "Introduction", pp. 9-70, at pp. 40, 48.

[26] Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 139.

[27] Hill, *Religion of Gerrard Winstanley*, p. 18.

[28] T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger: A Literary Analysis of Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 56, 83.

[29] Robert Barclay, *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, 2nd edn. (London, 1877), pp. 155-7.

[30] Hutin, *Disciples anglais de Jacob Boehme*, p. 74.

[31] Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 206.

[32] Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 316.

[33] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 57, 44 ff., 58, 63. According to Davis, "The pantheism of [*A Justification of the Mad Crew*] is curiously ambivalent and falls short of Bauthumley": *ibid.*, p. 58. This, however, is the one "Ranter" work which does *not* clearly dissociate itself from pantheism.

[34] Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes*, p. 40.

be "Ranter" theology was characterized by dualism.[35] For the
radical spiritualists, the flesh and the spirit are not two sides of
the same coin, as they are in pantheism, but two fundamentally
different, and currently hostile, principles. One source of this
dualism can be found in the "twofold system, a scheme of nature
and a scheme of grace" which characterized mainstream Pur-
itanism.[36] The radical spiritualists simply took this "twofold
system" to its logical conclusion. Friedman also traces this dual-
ism back to Gnosticism, but fails to indicate how Gnostic thought
was mediated to the spiritualists of the seventeenth century.[37]
The answer to this is probably to be found in the occult sciences,
more specifically in the Weigelian-Behmenist synthesis of medi-
eval mysticism and Renaissance Hermeticism.[38]

That the radical spiritualists were dualist is suggested by the
prominence of the spirit/flesh antithesis in their works. "I purely
worship in the spirit", Coppe asserted, "having no confidence in
the flesh".[39] Tany tells us that "the body of man is not the bestial
body; for the true essential body of man is Christ".[40] For Tany,
"the fall is being created, for when we were not created, and
uncome forth, we were as he is, that is in perfection".[41] Clarkson
asserts that "till flesh be made Spirit, and Spirit flesh, so not two,
but one, thou art in perfect bondage".[42] Coppin's insistence on
"the crucifying of the flesh"[43] only makes sense within a dualist
framework. So does his belief that man in himself is incapable of
knowing God, that it is God in man who knows Himself: "As

[35] Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy*, pp. 19, 70, 75.
[36] *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647-49) from the Clarke Manu-scripts*, ed. A. S. P. Woodhouse, 3rd edn. (London, 1986), "Introduction", p. 39; cf. pp. 57 ff.
[37] The anti-Ranter tracts frequently identify the Ranters as Gnostics, but understand Gnosticism to mean little more than antinomian amoralism. See for example the anonymous *The Ranters Religion* (London, 1650), in Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, pp. 157-60, at p. 157.
[38] Koyré notes that Weigel made "a first attempt at synthesis" of these currents of thought: see Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes*, p. 82. The synthesis was com-pleted by Boehme, whom C. G. Jung rightly regarded as the seminal figure in seventeenth-century spiritual alchemy: C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London, 1953), p. 410.
[39] Abiezer Coppe, *A Remonstrance of the Sincere and Zealous Protestation of Abiezer Coppe* (London, 1651), T.C., E.621 (5), p. 1.
[40] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Theous Ori Apokolipikal*, p. 8.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 12; cf. Thomas Tany, *Theauraujohn His Aurora in Tranlagorum in Salem Gloria* (London, 1651), T.C., E.853 (26), p. 57.
[42] Clarkson, *Single Eye All Light*, p. 14.
[43] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, ii, p. 43.

the sun shining upon the water answers it self, so the Lord shining in us answers himself".[44] Bauthumley shared this epistemology: "For if I say I see thee, it is nothing but thy seeing thy selfe; for there is nothing in me capable of seeing thee but thy selfe".[45] Bauthumley specifically dissociates God from the material creation: "God is pleased to dwell in flesh, and to dwell with and in man, yet he is not flesh, nor doth the flesh partake of the divine being".[46] We should note with regard to this dualism that the Hermetic doctrine of creation *ex deo* does not necessarily imply that God and matter are one and the same. This doctrine should be read in the context of Hermetic thought as a whole. The creation *ex deo* is followed by a fall, and that fall is characterized as a fall into matter.[47] The material world is formed not so much by an emanation from the divine as by an alienation from it.

At first sight, the annihilationist mortalism which was shared by all the radical spiritualists seems to support a pantheistic interpretation of their thought.[48] "[A]s all things were let out of God", according to Bauthumley, "so shall they give up their Being, life and happiness into God again".[49] After death, Tany tells us, "the life returns to the fountain from whence it had its Origine".[50] Clarkson, in his spiritualist days, thought that man's life returned to God as a stream returns to the ocean.[51] Winstanley believed that the soul was like a bucket of water taken out of the sea, God; at death, it is "poured into the Sea again, and becomes one with the sea".[52]

The anti-Ranter tracts are unanimous in recognizing the Ranters' mortalism, but treat it as thnetopsychism rather than

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[45] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, p. 1.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[47] Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes*, pp. 64-5; Desirée Hirst, *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* (London, 1964), p. 93.

[48] Annihilationism was the belief that the soul dissolves into the godhead at death. There were two other forms of mortalism: thnetopsychism, the belief that both body and soul die, to be revived miraculously at the Last Judgement; and psychopannychism, the belief that the soul continues to exist, but in an unconscious state, until the Resurrection. For the varieties of mortalism, see Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

[49] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, p. 9; cf. pp. 49, 53.

[50] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Theous Ori Apokolipikal*, p. 3.

[51] Laurence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (London, 1661), p. 28.

[52] Winstanley, *Truth Lifting Up Its Head*, ed. Sabine, p. 117; cf. Gerrard Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousness* (London, 1649), in *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 149-244, at p. 219.

annihilationism.[53] This is strange, given the hysterical nature of
these pamphlets, since it was annihilationism that was regarded
as the worst form of mortalism; it alone warranted death under
the Blasphemy Act of 1648.[54] The spiritualists' mortalism, how-
ever, is quite clearly annihilationist, and differs fundamentally
from the thnetopsychist mortalism adopted by Overton, Hobbes
and Milton.[55] This latter form of mortalism was premised on the
belief that the soul could not subsist without the body.[56] Thneto-
psychism is essentially a materialist philosophy; annihilationism,
on the other hand, tends to draw a distinction between a perish-
able body and an immortal spirit. The spirit, however, is not
personal to individual men and women; it is in fact God dwelling
in man's body. George Foster, for example, thought that at death
the body dissolves into the four elements, while the soul (God's
being in man) "returnes to its centre" in God.[57] Coppin argued
that "the outward person of a man is like a shadow, and like a
shadow goes away".[58] He explains that the body "is of the earth,
and to the earth it must return again, . . . but the spirit, that is
the soul, returns to whence it came".[59] The concluding lines of
Winstanley's *The Law of Freedom* also suggest this doctrine:
"Come take this body, and scatter it in the Four,/ That I may
dwell in One, and rest in peace once more".[60]

The broad outlines of the spiritualists' philosophy of God and
nature can now be discerned. Spirit (God) unites with flesh; it is
trapped in matter. The material world is "the Grave, where the
King of Glory (the eternall, invisible Almightinesse,) hath lain as

[53] See for example Gilbert Roulston, *The Ranters Bible* (London, 1650), in Davis,
Fear, Myth and History, pp. 169-73, at p. 171. Roulston's claim, that the "Seleutian
Donatist" Ranters believed that Christ's flesh is now in the sun, may recall a passage
in Richard Overton, *Mans Mortalitie*, ed. H. Fisch (Liverpool, 1968), pp. 52-3; the
association of this with Ranterism may have been one reason Overton omitted the
passage from the 1654 edition of *Man Wholly Mortal*.

[54] Burns, *Christian Mortalism*, pp. 13-18.

[55] Overton, *Mans Mortalitie*; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson
(Harmondsworth, 1968), chs. 38, 44, 46; John Milton, *A Treatise of Christian Doctrine*,
in *The Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. J. A. St. John, 5 vols. (London, 1848-53), iv,
chs. 7, 13.

[56] See for example Milton, *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*, p. 189.

[57] George Foster, *The Sounding of the Last Trumpet* (London, 1650), T.C., E.616
(4), p. 53. Curiously, Foster combined this view with a belief in reincarnation for
the wicked.

[58] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, iii, p. 2.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[60] Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (London, 1652), in *Works
of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 501-600, at p. 600; cf. p. 565.

it were, dead and buried".[61] Ultimately, spirit will be released from its bondage to matter and will return to its centre in God. Much of what is taken to be the spiritualists' pantheism results from expressions about the origin and destiny of the spirit being taken as pronouncements on both spirit and matter. The dividing line between these two realms, however, is not drawn where the modern mind would expect it to be drawn: between man and the rest of creation, or between the "animate" part of creation and the "inanimate". This is because the concept of an inanimate nature does not occur in occult thought: everything has life, everything is imbued with the *anima mundi*.[62] God is to be found in the highest cedar and the ivy on the wall, but only in so far as these belong to the realm of spirit. They also belong to the realm of matter, and as such have nothing to do with God.

Another common feature shared by the writers under review was their eschatology. For spiritualists, traditional notions of a local heaven and hell lose their meaning. "Heaven and hell, light and darknesse, sorrow and comforts", according to Winstanley, "is all to be seen within".[63] The idea of heaven as "a place above the skies", for the author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, is "a vain, empty, foolish, imaginary kingdom".[64] "The heaven in which God dwells is the saints", thought Coppin.[65] "Heaven is not the outward place", according to Bauthumley, but living "no other life then what Christ spiritually lives in me"; "our ceasing to live in God, and living in the self-Being, is the Hell".[66] Hell for Tany "is this earthly prison", or else "a subtill policy of the priests to fright us to themselves".[67] The eschatology of these writers was spiritualized. This is true even in the case of George Foster, who in some ways gives the impression of Fifth Monarchism. Foster thought that hell involves no other torments than being cast out of God's "love and favour", "which hell shall be here on earth".[68] His God explicitly asserts that "I will not appear

[61] Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (London, 1649), T.C., E.587 (13), sig. A2^r.
[62] Metals for example are "vegetable things (which have a Being and life)": *Chymical, Medicinal and Chyrurgical Addresses Made to Samuel Hartlib* (London, 1655), T.C., E.1509 (2), sigs. *1^v-*2^r.
[63] Winstanley, *New Law of Righteousness*, ed. Sabine, p. 215.
[64] *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, p. 10.
[65] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, iii, p. 21.
[66] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, pp. 14, 19, 43.
[67] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Aurora in Tranlagorum*, pp. 39, 8.
[68] Foster, *Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, p. 52.

personally for to raign over you . . . but I will raign in you".[69]
This eschatology includes a belief in universal salvation. Whereas
Lutheran and Calvinist Reformers had abolished purgatory, the
spiritualists abolished hell. Coppin taught that "the man himself
is to be saved, though by fire, and that which is to be burnt up,
is his works".[70] Winstanley thought that people would be forgiven
their sins, but this would not be without suffering: "the founder
cannot burn away the drosse, but must burn the gold too in
the fire".[71]

Among the radical spiritualists of Interregnum England the
belief in the indwelling of God also led to a rejection of external
religious practices. Coppin declared that "the light of all holy
Worship, Ordinances, Prayers, Duties, Preaching, and the like,
. . . are vanishing lights, and like shadows must away, when the
substance, which is the Son of Righteousness, appears".[72]
"[T]hou shalt no longer have need of outward ordinances",
Foster proclaimed, "no, but saith the lord, I will be thy light and
glory".[73] Coppe appears to be the least hostile of the spiritualists
to the externals of religion, but this is merely indicative of his
supreme indifference to such matters. He accepts "that God can
speak, & gloriously preach to some through Carols, Anthems,
Organs". He immediately undermines this apparent endorsement
of Laudianism with the reflection that God can speak "Through
Fishers, Publicans, Tanners, Tent-makers, Leathern aprons, as
well as through University men".[74]

As with outward ordinances, so with the word of God. The
true meaning of the Bible, thought Coppin, was incomprehensible
without inner illumination: "the greatest wisdome and learning
of men is not able to find out the true meaning of one word in
Scripture; for the truth is altogether mysticall"; "the only means
which God hath given to interpret the Scripture is the Spirit of
Himself".[75] Scripture, Bauthumley conceded, is "the truest testi-
mony of God in the world", but "I must not build my faith on

[69] George Foster, *The Pouring Fourth of the Seventh and Last Viall* (London, 1650),
T.C., E.616 (4*), p. 65.
[70] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, iii, p. 25.
[71] Winstanley, *Truth Lifting Up Its Head*, ed. Sabine, p. 132.
[72] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, i, p. 20.
[73] Foster, *Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, p. 9.
[74] Abiezer Coppe, *Some Sweet Sips, of Some Spiritual Wine* (London, 1649), in
Collection of Ranter Writings, ed. Smith, pp. 42-72, at p. 60.
[75] Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, iii, sig. A2ʳ; i, p. 7.

it, or any saying of it"; "the Scripture is within and spirituall, and the Law being writ in my spirit, I care not much for beholding it in the Letter".[76] For Coppe, "the History" (the outward word) was "haire-cloth", but "the Mystery [its spiritual significance] is fine flax".[77] Mere belief was insufficient without the felt experience of God living within. As Winstanley put it, "you are not saved by believing that there was such a man, that lived and died in Jerusalem . . . till you feel the power of a meek spirit come into you and raigne King, and tread all your envy, frowardnesse and bitternesse of spirit underfoot".[78] "Christ in the Head is a lye", said Thomas Tany, "without being in the heart".[79]

It is not only religious ordinances that are superseded by the indwelling of God: the spiritualists' religious views led them to adopt what Norman Cohn has called "mystical anarchism". Bauthumley argued "that if men were acted & guided by that inward law of righteousnesse within, there need be no laws of men, to compel or restrain men".[80] Foster agreed with this view: "and my God said, there shall be no power besides myself, so no other law".[81] Although Davis has argued strongly for Winstanley's "respect for power and its personal and institutional manifestations", and that he "was never an anti-authoritarian",[82] the works of 1649 clearly reject all external authority. No one needs "run abroad after any Teacher or Ruler without him".[83] Even in his later works, Winstanley does not ask that the existing regime institute the new communist society — that is a job for the spirit of reason within. What Winstanley asks of the state is that it should tolerate the growth of the new society until everyone has discovered its benefits for himself.[84] That, in the earlier works, is the point at which the state would wither away. In *The Law of Freedom*, Winstanley has lost faith in this latter possibility, but this loss of faith should not be read back into the works of 1649.

[76] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, pp. 72, 75.
[77] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 4.
[78] Gerrard Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise* (London, 1648), T.C., E.2137 (1), pp. 84-5.
[79] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Theous Ori Apokolipikal*, p. 34.
[80] Bauthumley, *Light and Dark Sides of God*, p. 76.
[81] Foster, *Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, p. 52.
[82] J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writings, 1516-1700* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 182.
[83] Gerrard Winstanley, *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (London, 1649), in *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 247-66, at p. 251.
[84] Winstanley, *Law of Freedom*, ed. Sabine, p. 513.

The idea of human identity with the divine was used to justify a powerful sense of human solidarity: being all ultimately one, we should live in peace and liberty, sharing the goods of the earth. Davis has asserted, in connection with Foster's thought, that "The emphasis on levelling and equality provides one obvious context and it is not a Ranting one".[85] Perhaps not, but it was certainly one shared by many of those who are usually called "Ranters". The radical spiritualists' social ethic was based on the "golden rule", doing unto others as you would be done by. This was, of course, a principle cited almost universally by radicals of every persuasion; it can be found in Overton and Walwyn, for example. The spiritualists, however, gave the principle a characteristically communist twist.

Coppe poured scorn on the Eucharist, arguing that "The true communion amongst men, is to have all things common, and to call nothing one hath, ones own".[86] One of the principles of the author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* is that the regenerate "hold all things in common": children, wives, lands and money are all really the Lord's, hence everyone's.[87] Thieving, cheating and lying were but the products of "Mine and Thine", thought Clarkson.[88] "Is Christ your hope, your glorying glory?" asks Tany, "alas, he is the substance of that lettered name: he commands love ye are murderers, he commands do work of mercy, how many starve for want of bread? he saith cloth, how many naked? O leave off the name, and in your obedience pursue the thing".[89] The social gospel is not very prominent in Coppin's writings, but it is implicit in the allegorical interpretation he gives to the inn in the nativity story: it is a place "where you have all things in common".[90] Winstanley's view that the earth was created "to be a Common Treasury", and should be again, is the best-known example of the spiritualists' social gospel.[91] Foster echoes Winstanley in believing that "it was the pleasure of the Father at the first, for to give the creature man, an equall privi-

[85] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 30.
[86] Abiezer Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* (London, 1649), T.C., E.587 (14), p. 21.
[87] *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, pp. 16-19.
[88] Clarkson, *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 27.
[89] Tany, *Theauraujohn His Aurora in Tranlagorum*, p. 13.
[90] Richard Coppin, *A Man-Child is Born* (London, 1654), T.C., E.745 (1), p. 28.
[91] Winstanley, *True Levellers Standard*, ed. Sabine, p. 251.

ledge to all alike''.[92] The time has come, Foster thinks, when men will throw away "their Idols of Gold and Silver". Foster envisaged God cutting down "all those that were higher then the middle sort", and raising up those that were lower, crying "equalitie, equalitie".[93]

<p align="center">★   ★   ★</p>

Davis's use of evidence to discredit the existence of a Ranter movement is occasionally wayward. He tells us that the call in *A Justification of the Mad Crew* "is to purity of heart, not to the liberation of practical antinomianism", and that the pamphlet contains no social radicalism.[94] This is to apply a similar exegetical procedure to that of the spiritualists to the author's eighth principle, that the righteous will "hold all things in common", including women and land.[95] Beneath the dead letter of the text Davis apparently discerns an entirely different meaning. According to Davis, a period as Baptist and Seeker separate Clarkson "the Captain of the Rant" from Clarkson the member of "My One Flesh".[96] Clarkson in fact says that he was called "Captain of the Rant" while relating his association with this group, *after* his periods as Baptist and Seeker. Davis asserts that, when Sarah Kullin invited Clarkson to bed, the latter did not say that he complied; in fact Clarkson tells us that Kullin and others "lay with me that night".[97] Most of the evidence on the Ranters is unreliable, especially that of the "yellow-press" pamphlets on which Davis concentrates; but unreliability is itself a very broad category. The doctrinal errors cited in such works are distortions of views held by so-called "Ranters", but they are distortions rather than fabrications. Many of the stories related, on the other hand, are patent absurdities; this does not necessarily mean that all are.

It is true that there is "no evidence of any close direct links" between Bauthumley, Coppe, Clarkson and the author of *A Justi-*

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[92] Foster, *Pouring Fourth of the Seventh and Last Viall*, sig. A3ᵛ.
[93] Foster, *Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, pp. 10-11, 17-18.
[94] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 58.
[95] *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, pp. 16-19.
[96] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 73.
[97] Clarkson, *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 26.

fication of the Mad Crew,[98] but a network of personal links of some sort can be established for Coppin, Coppe, Salmon, Clarkson, Winstanley and (through Pordage) Tany. The author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* cannot be included in this network because of his anonymity, unless we take seriously the suggestion that he is in fact Abiezer Coppe.[99] It is also not possible to connect George Foster personally with the other radical spiritualists, although he was certainly an admirer of Winstanley, and his belief that an Englishman was about to lead the Jews back to Jerusalem may link him with Tany.[100] There is insufficient evidence to judge the density of the network linking the spiritualists, but there are indications of the quality of some of the links. There was clearly some rivalry between Coppe and Clarkson (as there was between Lenin and Trotsky), but the contacts between Coppin, Coppe, Salmon and Webbe seem to have been fairly sympathetic. Salmon addressed the latter as "the Webb of my own spinning",[101] implying some notion of discipleship. In the same letter, he refers to Coppe as "my own heart", and Coppe wrote to Salmon and Wyke in very friendly terms.[102]

Nevertheless Davis is undoubtedly right in questioning the use of the word "Ranter" to refer to any of these radicals. Not only did many of them reject the word themselves; its indiscriminate application by contemporaries and historians alike has led to widespread confusion. It excludes figures like Winstanley, who was clearly of the same milieu; and it includes figures like Robins or Franklin, who equally clearly were not.

The radical spiritualists were not a sect. They had no formal organization in common, no rules of entry, no agreed discipline or ordinances. They were all, without exception, religious individualists. They did, however, share a common ideology based on an insistence on divine immanence. They were dualists and annihilationists who expected the "restoration of all things" to occur in their own lifetimes. They denied the reality of heaven

[98] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 75.

[99] Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy*, p. 126.

[100] Foster, *Pouring Fourth of the Seventh and Last Viall*, p. 55. The Jews' return to Jerusalem under Tany's leadership was a repeated theme of Tany's pamphlets: see for example Thomas Tany, *Theauraujohn High Priest to the Jews* (London, 1650); Thomas Tany, *I Proclaime from the Lord of Hosts the Returne of the Jews* (London, 1650), T.C., 669.f.15 (28).

[101] Joseph Salmon, letter to Webbe, 3 Apr. 1650, in *Collection of Ranter Writings*, ed. Smith, pp. 201-2.

[102] Abiezer Coppe, letter to Salmon and Wyke, n.d., *ibid.*, p. 117.

and hell as places located outside the spirit, rejected external ordinances, and exalted the light of the indwelling God above the written word of Scripture. Other common features, such as their Joachimism, might be cited.[103] Politically, their religious views led them into mystical anarchism, pacifism and communism. All these, of course, can be dismissed as "common features of the mid-seventeenth-century landscape of spiritual enthusiasm".[104] Any one of these features can be found in any number of radicals, but when we look for those who were characterized by all of them we find a much smaller group: the "Diggers" and the "Ranters". These writers can be distinguished from such radicals as the Levellers and Fifth Monarchists by their spiritualism, their anarchism and their communism.[105] They can also be distinguished from other spiritualists both in their social radicalism and in their uncompromising hostility to the externals of religion.

There were, of course, differences between these people. Winstanley was no friend to "Ranters", in whose number he almost certainly included Clarkson.[106] Clarkson, for his part, denounced Winstanley's "self-love and vain-glory" to his face.[107] Coppe rejected both "sword-levelling" and "digging-levelling" in principle, preferring what Morton called "levelling by miracle",[108] and in this Coppe seems to have been representative of the movement as a whole. The major area of dissent was undoubtedly sexual ethics. It was this issue, and alleged Ranter idleness, which led to Winstanley's bitter attacks on Ranterism. These attacks did not involve a rejection of any supposed Ranter principle other than "practical antinomianism", nor did they involve any known "Ranter" personality other than Clarkson.

[103] Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London, 1976), discusses Joachimite ideas from their inception through to the seventeenth century; A. L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London, 1958), ch. 3, relates Joachimism to Interregnum English radicalism.

[104] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 75.

[105] This is to leave aside the question of William Walwyn, who certainly had spiritualist tendencies and may have been a communist.

[106] Gerrard Winstanley, *A Vindication . . . of Those Called Diggers* (London, 1650), in *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 399-403, *passim*; "England's Spirit Unfoulded, or an Incouragement to Take the *Engagement*: A Newly Discovered Pamphlet by Gerrard Winstanley", ed. G. E. Aylmer, *Past and Present*, no. 40 (July 1968), pp. 3-14, at p. 14; the reference to Clarkson can be found in Gerrard Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* (London, 1650), in *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. Sabine, pp. 445-97, at pp. 477-8.

[107] Clarkson, *Lost Sheep Found*, p. 27.

[108] Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 2; Morton, *World of the Ranters*, p. 71.

Compared with what they had in common, their differences were minor, although they may not have appeared so to the participants. Admittedly the radical spiritualists were not "a sect with clear leaders, authoritative texts, disciplinary tests on entry and controls over numbers".[109] Yet the radical spiritualists embodied more than "the independent, largely divergent or distinctive views of unco-ordinated and isolated individuals".[110] Perhaps the nearest modern analogy is the anarchist movement, containing as it does pacifists and insurrectionists, communists and individualists, atheists and Roman Catholics: as many anarchisms as there are anarchists, and every anarchist seemingly at every other anarchist's throat — yet nevertheless recognizably a movement with a shared ideology.

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[109] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 43.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

REPLY

I welcome the critical reaction to *Fear, Myth and History* and my appraisal of its reception, if only for the marginally selfish reason of not wanting to engage in a sterile and endless reaffirmation of my position in that book. But though the clouds darkened with an abundance of irritation and a modicum of sourness, too little precipitation falls to refresh the parched landscape of this historiographical terrain. "The Cloud without rain" of Gerrard Winstanley's observing is yet with us.[1] The boundaries of debate are not being extended, except — and it is an honourable exception — by Brian Gibbons. Frank McGregor and Bernard Capp reaffirm old interpretations, sometimes those of others rather than their own, sometimes conflicting ones, with no new evidence to sustain them but with a good deal of dubious reading of the old evidence and of my interpretation of it. Nigel Smith expresses impatience and irritation — most of it laid at my door — that the debate does not move on, while mystifyingly doing nothing convincing

[1] Compare Gerrard Winstanley's discussion of the "Cloud without rain" in *The Law of Freedom* (London, 1652), in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. George H. Sabine (New York, 1965), p. 569. My thanks for this, and much else besides, to John Stephens.