NIGEL SMITH

PERFECTION PROCLAIMED

Language and Literature in English Radical Religion 1640–1660

Anni tris facundi Olivero rignante ciam quatuor.

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To my parents

Fanaticism is the *fever* of *superstition*. Enthusiasm, on the contrary, implies an undue (or when used in a good sense, an unusual) vividness of ideas, as opposed to perceptions, or of the obscure inward feelings.   Coleridge

PREFACE

THIS study is a revised version of a doctoral thesis researched and written mostly in Oxford between 1981 and 1985. That project was originally conceived as a comprehensive attempt to do justice to the extraordinary qualities of expression and conception in the writing of Civil War and Interregnum religious radicalism. It is a literary and language-concerned work, but it will be evident to any reader that the context is deeply historical. The idea of a literary criticism informed by history and historically oriented theories of interpretation (the 'new historicism') is currently fashionable. If what follows has any contribution to make to that debate, then it is to show that there is no division between fields of evidence and critical approaches which we often define as literary and those which we call historical. The two are continuous. Just as language and 'literary' statements cannot be divorced from the conditions of production and circulation in a given historical location, so evidence of a historical nature, especially that which is written or spoken, is not immune from interpretative perspectives concerned with representation, mediation, and signification. These matters, rhetoric, conventions of behaviour, textual interpretation, the communication of cognition and conceptualization, are part of any modern Western society's make-up.

with Frank Boyce, Martin Dodsworth, Kate Flint, Dr Michael Hunter, Dr David Katz, and Kate Pahl. Thanks should also go to Dr John Hoyles, who first stimulated my interest in this subject, and Dr Robin Robbins, my supervisor, for his advice and encouragement. Any errors or shortcomings are, of course, my own fault.

For the past few years Professor John Carey has been a constant shepherd and example in countless different ways. I should like to acknowledge with deep gratitude his support, his kindness, and his remarkable intelligence. Anyone approaching the field of radical religion is indebted to the excellent work of Dr G. F. Nuttall, Christopher Hill, and A. L. Morton. I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to these historians. Geoffrey Nuttall deserves special mention for the time he has spent reading most of this book, for the lengths to which he has gone in search of useful information, and, above all, for his supereminent friendship, in Bournville and Oberhofen, and through the post.

N.S.

Keble College

ABBREVIATIONS

Add.   Additional Manuscripts, British Library
BDBR   R. L. Greaves and R. Zaller (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols. (Brighton, 1982–4).
BIHR   *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*
BL   British Library
Bodl.   Bodleian Library
BQ   *Baptist Quarterly*
CJ   *Journal of the House of Commons*, 34 vols. (1742–92).
CRW   *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the Seventeenth Century*, ed. N. Smith (1983).
CSPD   *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*
CUL   Cambridge University Library
DNB   *Dictionary of National Biography*
EHR   *English Historical Review*
ELH   *Journal of English Literary History*
HLQ   *Huntington Library Quarterly*
JBS   *Journal of British Studies*
JBSQ   *Jacob Boehme Society Quarterly*
JEH   *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JFHS   *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*
JHI   *Journal of the History of Ideas*
JMRS   *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*
JWCI   *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*
N & Q   *Notes and Queries*
OED   *Oxford English Dictionary*
P & P   *Past and Present*
PMLA   *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
Rawl.   Rawlinson Manuscripts, Bodleian Library
RES   *Review of English Studies*
RQ   *Renaissance Quarterly*
SCH   *Studies in Church History*
SCJ   *Sixteenth Century Journal*
TBHS   *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*

TEXTUAL NOTE

FOR ease of reference, and where necessary, short titles have been used. Roman and italic type in original titles have been rendered as italic here. Upper-case and lower-case usages in the titles have been normalized: no case of interpretation rests upon their original renderings in this study. In all quotations, however, punctuation, spelling, and italicization remain as in the originals. Unless stated otherwise, the place of publication is London.

Where a modern edition of a seventeenth-century text has been used, quotations have been compared with the original and corrected where necessary.

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1617, and in a Yorkshire parish so far west that it was almost in Lancashire, someone may have said something like this: 'That Christians affirmed can never committ a grosse sinne. Grace being wrought in the heart, the spirit quite abolisheth all former knowledge.' Someone else may have said, 'The prophesy of old men dreaming dreames, and young men seeing visions, is now fulfilled in Grundleton Chappell', and someone else still could have said something which approximated to 'They have received such abundance of grace that now they can stand without using the meanes and so will doe when Mr Bryerley goeth.'

Mr Bryerley was Roger Brierley (or Brereley), curate of Grindleton in the parish of Mitton in Craven, Yorkshire.[1] What might have been said occurs in a document entitled 'Certaine erroneous opinions gathered from the mouth of Mr Bryerley and some of his hearers'.[2] This was the written evidence produced by an episcopal investigation into the beliefs and practices of the Grindleton chapel. The cautionary 'might' is used because it is almost certain that the interrogators would have cast the utterances of those whom they questioned into a vocabulary which expressed the errors in a form compatible with the language of established church government. We are not listening to the voice of the Grindletonian.

However, there is another quality in the words of the document. Occasionally, official doctrinal language becomes something else. It is either personal, 'that faith and feeling are things inseparable', or to do with biblical interpretation: 'That the Arke of the Covenant is shut up or pinned in within the wals of Grundleton Chappell'.[3] The nouns and the verbs in these two quotations are pointing towards another kind of language, partly outside 'official' terminology, though definitely reacting with it, and a component, as well as a vehicle, of the 'error' itself.

[1] See G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1946), 178–80; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), 81–5.

[2] Bodl. MS Rawl. D. 1347, fos. 317ʳ–318ʳ. Another copy exists in Bodl. MS Rawl. D. 399, fos. 196ʳ. The two are substantially the same, differing in the order of errors and occasionally in vocabulary. [3] Ibid., errors 5 and 36.

The speech or writing of a Grindletonian in this period has yet to be found. Brierley was a learned man, and his writings suggest this. They exhibit the structured conceptualization of a devotional treatise, poem, or sermon—except that within these parameters there may be an attempt to introduce a type of discourse, quite alien to anything in the English reformed tradition.

The members of Brierley's congregation might not have sounded so very different from the members of the separatist congregation in Bristol, a Baptist church by 1640, who mingled what has been called a 'bland language of Canaan' with their own deeply' emotional attempts to understand the working of the divine upon themselves.[4] In these early days, one of their number was a black servant called Frances. That a 'blackamoor' should have grace surprised the congregation, and they came to revere her, eventually treating her dying words as a prophetic message for the church: to let '*the glory of God to be dear unto them*'.[5]

The Grindletonians were an early example of the religious communities whose languages are the concern of this book. Though Brierley did not see fit openly to separate from the established church, the Grindletonians were practising a form of worship which could never be tolerated inside it. Like those who did separate, the Grindletonians were searching for the true model of church government and worship, as it was laid down in the New Testament. The rejection of idolatrous 'externals', the assertion that the believer is made perfect through the freely given grace of God, and the feeling that the gift of the Holy Spirit, χάραγμα, could fall upon any individual, characterize the nature of the Grindletonian community, so the evidence tells us. To a greater or lesser degree, and in very many different ways, these were the distinguishing marks of English 'radical religion'. This book is a study of how that culture produced such an extraordinary array of discourses, what the active role of these expressions was in the history of radical religion between 1640 and 1660, and what they meant in the wider perspective of mid-seventeenth-century English society. It is an attempt to build upon the findings of the valuable but few literary studies concerned with the sects which have appeared, largely in recent

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[4] *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660*, ed. B. R. White, 3 parts (1971–4), ii. 53.

[5] *The Records of a Church of Christ Meeting in Broadmead, Bristol, 1640–1687*, ed. E. B. Underhill (1847), 35.

years, against the background of the wider historiographical interest in Puritanism.[6]

The early dissenters and sectarians thought they were engaged in that further purification and reform of the church which Luther had originally begun, beyond the limits which had been defined by Henry VIII and revised by Elizabeth I. Our understanding of early dissent is determined by the fact that 1640 was the first time the phenomenon had broken out on such a scale, set as it was against the wider background of political and civil turmoil in the following years. It is no surprise that the abolition of episcopal government, the collapse of the censorship, and the absence of a national policy of church government throughout the Interregnum contributed to the expansion and fragmentation. On their road to the re-creation of apostolic Christian society, the radicals, as churches, sects, and individuals, often in debate with each other, created their own distinctive linguistic usages, their own habits of expression and communication, their own literature and culture. For them it was a search for truth, grace, and, in some cases, perfection, separate from the impure and the ignorant. From the outside this often seemed like the presumptuous rejection of a divinely ordained social order and the endangering of spiritual well-being in the sight of God.

The term 'radical Puritan' could be seen as very close to the definition of radical religion, except that this would not do justice to the complex situation in which early radical religion grew up, in the century or so before 1640. As Patrick Collinson has recently suggested, it is wrong to think of the Elizabethan and Jacobean church as a distinct, nationally adopted church polity and practice which could be labelled 'Anglican'.[7] Rather, it was a series of differing positions on theology and church discipline held by clergymen, from archbishops to the lower ranks. The

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[6] See Luella M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends, 1650–1725* (New York, 1932); G. F. Nuttall, *Studies in Christian Enthusiasm* (Wallingford, Pa., 1948); id., *The Welsh Saints 1640–1660* (Cardiff, 1957), 24–5, 48; Jackson I. Cope, 'Seventeenth Century Quaker Style', *PMLA* 71 (1956), 725–54: Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (1972), 91–9, 144–207; Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, 'The Dialect of Those Fanatick Times: Language Communities and English Poetry from 1580 to 1660' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1977); Richard Bauman, *Let your words be few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Cambridge, 1983).

[7] *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982), 92–140.

Puritans of Elizabeth's reign were those who complained against the impurity of 'externals': bowing at the name of Jesus, kneeling at communion, the use of what were seen as 'Popish relics' in the Prayer Book, and ecclesiastical vestments. This was in addition to the drive of the Puritans to make 'godly' behaviour the code to which all households in the kingdom adhered. While most Puritans desired to reform the church from within, others, like the followers of Robert Browne and Henry Barrow, established their own congregations. They asserted that the congregation should be self-governing, especially in the appointment of its own ministers, and stressed their godly fellowships by making covenants which would ensure their correct behaviour and belief.[8]

In small numbers and in a sporadic and precarious manner, the separatist churches, which were to thrive after 1640, established themselves during the first three decades of the seventeenth century, both at home and in exile. There is no need here to recount at length that history, which has been and continues to be thoroughly researched. A few details, however, are relevant. First of all, this separatism was preceded by an even more spectral presence of radicals, going back to the 1550s, including Anabaptists, 'free will men', and the Family of Love. They challenged predestinarian theology and can be said to have had some influence upon later separatists, both in terms of their ideas and in the way that commentators developed hostile stereotypes of religious radicals in reaction to them.[9]

After the Brownists came the first Baptists, who required adult baptism as a sign of conversion and purified separation. Slightly later came what is known as Independency or 'semi-separatism'.[10] Here, a church would be gathered by the free and mutual consent of believers joining and covenanting together, but there was no absolute rejection of communion with the

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[8] See B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford, 1971), 49; Robert Browne, *A Treatise of reformation without tarying for anie* (Middelburg, 1582); John Canne, *The Necessity of Separation* (1634), ed. Charles Stovel (1849); Stephen Brachlow, 'The Elizabethan Roots of Henry Jacob's Churchmanship: Refocusing the Historiographical Lens', *JEH* 36 (1985), 228–54.

[9] See I. B. Horst, *The Radical Brethren: Anabaptism and the English Reformation to 1558* (Nieuwkoop, 1972); J. W. Martin, 'Elizabethan Protestant Separatism at its Beginnings: Henry Hart and the Free Will Men', *SCJ* 7 (1976), 55–74.

[10] Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London, 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977), 7–27.

parish in the hope that reform would spread to the community at large. There were also areas where practices and beliefs were harboured which could never be tolerated inside the established church, as is the case with the Grindletonians. Though some Baptists (the General Baptists) rejected predestination to damnation, most of these radicals stayed within the limits of covenant theology and shared an extreme hostility to ceremony, increasingly regarding sacraments and ordinances as figurative.[11] At the same time, the complex patterns of conversion, of the passage from reprobation to adoption, assurance, justification, and sanctification, developed by Elizabethan Puritans were the doctrinal stuff of much early nonconformity.[12]

The writing of the early nonconformists is built around this doctrinal language, which has been called a 'morphology of conversion'.[13] Across the Puritan spectrum people would relate their experiences to the process of progression from unbelief and sinfulness to grace: this was called 'experimental' theology. While clergymen, including Independents, developed complex psychological and theological theories to explain the experimental, a personal radical religious discourse began to emerge from this context. The Independents required a confession of the experience of conversion, along with a confession of faith, from every individual seeking to join a gathered church. Records of experience were also kept by Baptists.[14] At the same time, in Baptist and other separatist churches, expounding upon the text, often in dispute with the preacher, led to open prophesying and spontaneous outpouring, the beginnings of later extreme sectarian utterances and styles.

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[11] There were further significant divisions within the Baptists and between Baptists and Independents. Some Baptist congregations remained 'Open', not requiring the believer to undergo an adult baptism. Henry Jessey's congregation was one such, and it is interesting to note that under such circumstances the flow of expression and prophesying was considerable. The Seventh Day Baptists emerged during these years, observing Jewish sabbatarian practice. For further details see Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England 2. From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox* (Princeton, 1975), 498; Tolmie, op. cit. 50–119.

[12] These aspects have recently been discussed with regard to New England in Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York and Oxford, 1986), 47–72.

[13] Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, NY, 1963), 90–1.

[14] See Katherine Sutton, *A Christian Womans Experience of the glorious working of Gods free grace* (Rotterdam, 1663), sigs. *1ᵛ–*2ᵛ.

It is important to realize that these forms of speech or writing were intimately bound up with forms of worship. In Independent and Baptist services there were no set prayers or choirs. In Baptist churches unison singing was discouraged, but individual singing approved. Katherine Sutton was one Baptist whose gift of singing extended outside worship and became the focus of her 'experiences'.[15] Highly emotional services were commonplace, with extempore prayers and prolix sermons, coupled with the taking of the sacrament in Pauline fashion: the 'breaking of bread' (1 Cor. 10: 16). For the se-baptist, John Smyth, all translation from the original languages of the Scripture was corrupt, as was reading from a text in a service. Expounding from the Scripture should be performed in Hebrew or Greek and from memory. In this way, worship in the Spirit created a superior language which needed no text to mediate divine truth between man and God.[16]

There were less extreme versions of Puritanism which were considered nonconformist before 1640. Having been in decline since Elizabeth's reign, English Presbyterianism, aided by its more successful Scottish cousin, came into its own during the 1640s. Its national hierarchical organization, the absence of a requirement of experiential confessions or the manifestation of gifts in believers, and its open opposition to more extreme forms of Nonconformity exclude it from radical religion.[17]

However, the 1640s also witnessed the emergence of more radical forms of sectarian religion. Some upheld mortalism, the notion that the soul dies with the body until the resurrection,

[15] Ibid., pp. 13–16.

[16] See John Smyth, *A Paterne of True Prayer* (1605), in *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. W. T. Whitley, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1915), 27.

[17] The Independent congregations, sometimes seen as quite close to Presbyterian ecclesiology except in the important matters of congregational autonomy and worship itself, are often excluded from the radical ticket. However, Independency contained a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices the radical end of which is certainly included in this study. From the gathered churches, as much as from the Baptist conventicles, developed the more extreme forms of sectarianism. Nevertheless, it is becoming apparent that the private devotional language of the Presbyterians was not so different from that of some of the Independents. The Independents tended to make public and political what was private for the Presbyterians: Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World* (1985), 42. For a stimulating interpretation of Presbyterian and Independent differences as a process of debate in which word-usages became blurred, see John K. Graham, ' "Independent" and "Presbyterian": A Study of Religious and Political Language and the Politics of Words During the English Civil War, c. 1640–1646', 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1978), 170 ff.

while others denied the divinity of Christ or entirely rejected ordinances.[18] This was a departure from the respectability of many of the Independent, Baptist, and Separatist churches during the Interregnum, a respectability which to some extent ran along lines of wealth. There were further challenges to scriptural authority, such as the denial that God created the world *ex nihilo*, which was sometimes coupled with rejection of the literal truth of the Bible and the habit of reading it as an allegory of the internal state of each individual, a practice which had characterized the Family of Love and which was to mark out the perfectionist groups of the late 1640s and 1650s, the Seekers, Ranters, and early Quakers. The ways in which the radicals came to express these concepts are a central literary concern of this study.

As has recently been argued, the Baptists provided a major forum for the growth of more radical forms of practice and expression.[19] The Baptists were concerned with the strict maintenance of ordinances, which could restrict the capacity for free and inspired expression. The records of the Interregnum Baptist churches show the constant excommunication of individuals for such professions.[20] This dilemma may well have been a function of the clash of dissenting discipline with what Patrick Collinson has described as a residual 'Pelagianism' in the country.[21] In the potential tension between the compulsion of ordinances and the liberty of the spirit lay a huge creative source.

In the 1640s those who professed the most internalized forms of radical religion were known as Seekers. Despite the confusion generated by the heresiographers, Seekers were in fact any who rejected the validity of external ordinances because they felt that all forms of visible church so far were part of the apostasy. Men

[18] See N. T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 42–164.

[19] J. F. McGregor, 'The Baptists: Fount of All Heresy', in J. F. McGregor and B. Reay (edd.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), 23–63.

[20] *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham, 1644–1720*, ed. E. B. Underhill (1854), 8, 12, 94–5, 117, 120. For a separatist like Katherine Chidley, the Lord's Supper was not scriptural and so not reliant upon the minister. This put ordinances on the same level as preaching: Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 98. Though Henry Jessey was removed from the living of Aughton, East Yorkshire, for dispensing with ceremonies a year after he had been appointed in 1633, he still defended ordinances in this world: Bodl. MS Rawl. C 409, fo. 64; Jessey, *A Storehouse of Provision* (1650), 29.

[21] *Religion of Protestants*, p. 202.