

Libertine and Libertinism:

Polemical Uses of the Terms in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English and Scottish Literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the actual usage of the terms libertine and libertinism within the context of early modern English literature, investigating how the very idea of libertinism starts appearing from the sixteenth century onward and how the character of the libertine was imported from France to the British Isles in the course of the seventeenth century. This latter term starts to appear in the direct and often explicit context of Calvin's work against the "sect" of the "Libertines." However, a dual usage of the term seems to articulate itself rather quickly, as the analysis of two pamphlets published in 1646 reveals: the libertine is then both a member of one of the many so-called spiritualist "sects" contesting the Anglican church and Calvinism simultaneously, or he is a ruthless hedonist. Exactly this conception, which arose within the context of Calvinism and in which the "liberty of the flesh" was understood as a false liberty, unites the two distinct interpretations of the term. The terms libertine and libertines were always used in a polemical and defamatory mode. However, an informal group described as the "rangers" claimed this term while at the same time trying to redefine it.



“**L**ibertinage” or “libertinism” is an established category of literary history and of the history of ideas between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and one that now seems self-evident. We should use both of these terms in the plural since historiography has established diachronic distinctions and has drawn very clear dividing lines among the “spiritual libertinism” of the sixteenth century stigmatized by Calvin, the “philosophical” or “erudite” libertinism of the seventeenth century, and

libertinism in the *mores* and in the literature of the eighteenth century. I have already tried to prove elsewhere that these distinctions, at least as a diachronic succession, are completely unfounded, especially if one refers to the actual use of the terms in historical sources.¹

Indeed, on a synchronic level—and more specifically for the seventeenth century—historiography has always created subdivisions: libertinism of thoughts and libertinism of *mores*; philosophical libertinism and practical libertinism; *libertinage flamboyant* and *libertinage érudit*, etc. However, the process of categorization itself is particularly debatable since it depends largely on how the sources construe such categories. Furthermore, this process of categorization gives a certain objectivity to the polemical and ideological conflicts we note in our sources in their political, religious, moral, and intellectual forms. That is, the category “libertine” refers to men and women, to groups of human beings, even to a type: the libertine, understood as the subject of a form of writing and thinking that is held to constitute the essential characteristic of “erudite libertinism.” But establishing categories in this way is contestable, since “erudite libertinage” is a specific historiographical construction, one without any philological legitimacy: the term “erudite libertine” does not occur in any of our sources and none of the authors incarnating this form of libertinism has ever presented himself as such.

This term, of course, seeks a different legitimacy, not of the word but of the thing, or rather of *the things*. That is because “erudite libertinage” is typically evoked to refer to an ensemble of networks of scholars, to specific forms of writing, even to an identifiable form of thought. Such thought bears the stamp of philosophical eclecticism, skepticism, the rejection of dogmatism (and therefore of any system), the valorization of experience, a more or less radical critique of a wide range of Church dogma, of the constituent beliefs of Christianity, and possibly of the moral rules derived from them. As we attempt a theoretical redefinition of “erudite libertinism” a couple of observations arise.

First of all, the attempt at a definition is basically an *a posteriori* rationalization of a category that was originally established on disputable grounds. The first historiography created the category of “libertine” starting from what the libertines *were not*: they were not thinkers worthy of the name, nor were they real philosophers capable of proposing alternative systems to the ones they criticized. Subsequent historiography tried to provide a positive content, a methodological if not doctrinal coherence, and, most of all, to attribute to the libertines a relative unity of writing and argumentation without, generally

speaking, questioning the established gap between the great philosophers, such as Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the minor libertines.

Second, the definition of *libertinism* as established is largely unfounded and extremely restrictive with respect to the historical sources, in which the term is used almost exclusively a polemical or disparaging manner. Restrictive, because the historiography of libertinism has erected as a model and as a major source that specific form of culture that René Pintard called "*libertinage érudit*," which is confined exclusively to the French members of networks that were in fact international.² But those who were called "libertines" and termed "erudite" by Pintard were certainly not the only ones to be fitted with this disparaging and accusatorial name at the time (essentially the first half of the seventeenth century, but we should probably also consider the frequent use of the term all over Europe from the sixteenth century onward). Moreover, they are not even the most discredited by the denunciation, which, in French as in other languages (vernacular and Latin), goes far beyond the erudite or deviant philosophers, and, moreover, written culture itself, by calling into question forms of behavior, of practice and of discourse, whose presence the sources confirm in the most diverse social strata, from the lowest to the highest.

However, taking into account the broad diversity of the terms in their fullest sense in the different European languages, along with the multiplicity of their polemical uses, does not cause the concept of libertinage to break down. It is not simply because anybody can be called a "libertine" that the word loses all meaning, or at least any meaning useful for history. In fact, such diversity of meaning considerably enriches the concept and perhaps ties it even more closely to the question of freedom and *freedoms*: to the false freedom of the flesh, to disobedience and rebellion denounced as illusions of liberation. Etymology continues for quite some time to weigh heavily on the concept, and it can even be shown that it may always be reactivated, even centuries later, when theological, moral, and political discourses vie for place.

It seems evident that going back to our sources for a re-examination of the term *libertinism* will considerably modify our perception of the authors and the texts that we tend to lump together under the designation "libertine." In so doing we can meticulously observe how these terms are used, as well as against whom and what they are deployed. We can also thereby find who accuses these authors of libertinism, as well as when and why, in order to arrive at a position to attempt comparisons on a pan-European level.

This foray into European sources holds many surprises, allowing us to show the close bonds that link the denunciation of libertinism with the stigmatization of a number of freedoms which are effectively claimed from the beginnings of modernity: the freedom of conscience, and thus religious tolerance; the *libertas philosophandi*, and ultimately the freedom of the press; the liberty of *mores* based on the principle of not harming anyone else and of mutual consent; the civil liberties of the citizens, as heralded by republican experiments and popular uprisings across Europe, in which the stigmatization of the rebel as well as of the libertine is certainly not systematic, but recurrent and above all extremely premature. Finally, it is sometimes surprising to find in some of the texts reversals from negative to positive and even explicit championing of the label “libertinism,” thereby brokering the term’s redefinition.

Polemical Introduction of the Term in the British Isles

In light of these questions of definition, it is worthwhile to consider the case of England and Scotland, which allows us to take a historically sideways step (and to forget France, at least for a moment), even though the historiography of libertinism for the British Isles (in English as well as in other languages) is almost entirely dependent on French modes of understanding the concept. We begin by investigating manifestations of libertinism in British culture with sources that are supposedly French or Italian. It is interesting to note how the use of the terms *libertine* and *libertinism* is introduced and evolves from the sixteenth century onwards, particularly in relation to the Calvinists and Calvin himself. Calvin’s 1545 pamphlet, *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des libertins qui se nomment spirituels*, was very early on imported into the British Isles, especially in its Latin translation, which was published the following year and was associated with the *Briève Instruction pour armer tout bon fidèle contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptistes*. This is an important publication, because it will establish the ongoing relationship between the Anabaptists and the libertines. In 1551, Jean Veron, a French Protestant living in England, wrote a prologue to the translation of a polemical dialogue written by the Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger entitled *The seditious Libertine or rebel Anabaptist, & the true obedient Christian*. There Veron writes that, in the county of Essex where he lives, “many of these libertines and Anabaptistes are running in hoker moker, among the symple and ignoraunte people to incite and move them to tumult and insurrection to magistrates and rulers of this realm” (Underhill cx). The crux of Ana-

baptist libertinism (for Bullinger and Veron the two terms are interchangeable, unlike for Calvin) is, according to Veron, the refusal to obey the magistrates, based on an erroneous reading of the Bible and the claim of a freedom that is in fact the “freedom of the flesh.”

In a text written in 1567 by John Knox, founder of the Scottish church, to defend the Calvinist doctrine of predestination against the author of a lost Anabaptist pamphlet of the same year—*Careless by Necessity* by Robert Cooke³—the Calvinist answers the accusation that his necessarian doctrine inspires people to lead a “carefree and libertine” life, inducing them not to work, to visit brothels, to drink, and to play.⁴ For Knox it is easy to protest that no one despises the Libertines more than the Calvinists, as Calvin proved twelve years before when writing his pamphlet and showing that nothing is more contrary to authentic Christian liberty than the freedom of the flesh of the alleged spiritualists (201).

This same type of defense can be found in *A confutation of a booke intituled an apologie of the Church of England* (1567) by John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury, against the Catholic Thomas Harding. In a controversial work about the partisans of the Reformation within the Church of England, for whom Jewel had written an *Apology*, Harding brings together the insidiously spreading sects in the Netherlands and subsequently in England in long lists in which the Libertines repeatedly appeared: “Anabaptists, Libertines, Zwenkfeldians, Nestorians, Eunomians, Arians, Adamites . . . Zuinglians, Arians, Osiandrines, Libertines, Adiaphoristes, Anabaptistes, Caluinistes, or Sathanistes” (qtd. in Jewel, *Confutation* 26, 29). Here we can observe two things: first of all, that the libertines are henceforth considered—and will be for a long time—both as merely one sect among many (which, however, like many others elsewhere, never had any real existence in England or, for that matter, as an established sect on the continent), and as the spirit of disobedience and the search for a freedom of the flesh which one can find in every sect. A Calvinistic denunciation quickly turned itself against the Calvinists themselves, as we can see in the writings of Knox, Jewel, and many others who were busy defending themselves against the accusation of libertinage, using retortion should the occasion arise. In a book published in 1583, the Catholic William Rainolds wrote that “libertinism is the end of justification by faith alone” (127).

Further examples abound, but it is clear in any case that in the exclusively insulting and slanderous uses of these terms, libertinism is interpreted as moral licentiousness, religious disobedience, and political disorder. But the

moral question remains central in the sense that the culmination of these allegedly libertine doctrines—the doctrines of the Anabaptists, the Perfecti (Cathar) Spiritualists, the antitrinitarian Socinians, but also those of the predestinarian Puritans, the “Jesuitical” Catholics, and later those of the Arminians (in fact, potentially every doctrine that can be attacked as being wicked and pernicious)—is moral dissolution and, along with it, a critique of authority.

Moral Libertinage and Impiety

The primacy of the moral question enables us to understand that the word *libertine* can refer, in England as well as on the Continent from the sixteenth century onwards, to those who abandon themselves to sexual licentiousness, thus threatening the social order. In *Hamlet*, for instance, Ophelia instructs her brother not to be “a puff’d and reckless libertine” who dishonours young ladies (1.3). We also find the word signifying the adoption of a relaxed lifestyle, as well as impertinence in language and expression, and the lack of submission to and respect for authority. In one of Ben Jonson’s comedies, *The Poetaster* (1601), for instance, the character of captain Pantilius Tucça denounces comedy writers who, like Horace—a front man for Ben Jonson himself in the play—slander, according to him, magistrates and other dignitaries by bringing their vices out into the open. He has him say that these poets “. . . are growne licentious, the rogues; libertines, flat libertines” (1.2). Significantly, Cotgrave’s 1611 French-English *Dictionnaire* translates *libertinage* as “epicurism, sensuality, licentiousnesse, dissolutenesse” (and not by “libertinism”).

The word *epicureanism*, used as a synonym for *libertinage*, refers at the same time to the idea of impiety, sometimes even atheism, in England and Scotland as well as in the other countries of Europe, Protestant as well as Catholic. In other words, contrary to what our libertine historiography contends and what English studies admit more or less explicitly, the characteristics of libertinism à la française, in which godlessness comes first, are also to be found on the other side of the Channel. For instance, from 1600, two decades before Garasse, we have an anonymous work of Protestant anti-libertine controversy with the title: *The touchstone of true religion. . . . against the pernicious impietie of the atheists, epicures, libertines, hipocrites, and temporisers of these last times.*

This is not surprising at all in this Protestant culture directly influenced by the writings of Calvin and his disciples, because, since 1554, Pierre Viret links

the epicureans to libertine spiritualists, not by the mere device of amalgamation, but by trying to show the convergence of their respective doctrines: in particular the liberation from the fear of God and, of course, the liberty of the flesh.⁵ In his later writings Viret establishes the trilogy “atheists, libertines, epicureans,” which will be found everywhere: in Protestant England and Scotland as well as in France or in the exclusively Catholic Italy.⁶

Two Pamphlets of 1646

One can therefore say that, in the (almost always) negative descriptions of libertinism in English literature of the seventeenth century, two types of libertinism are targeted that, however similar they may appear, need to be distinguished: the libertinism of religious sects and of the independents, characterized by religious dissension, but also accused at the same time of moral licentiousness; and epicurean libertinism, which shares the same putative immorality, but which is reproached not only with turning away from religion, but with producing philosophical criticism of it. What is most interesting here is the preservation of both the distinction and the resemblance between these two accusations of libertinism—what amounts, in fact, to the presence of a zone of contact where the distinction blurs, as well as the fact that these reciprocal contaminations take place on the level of doctrine as well as on the level of behavior and practice.

Two pamphlets published in London in 1646, along with the undeclared source of one of them, will illustrate this phenomenon. These pamphlets were published in the middle of the revolutionary years, at the end of the first war between Parliament and the king, when the parliamentary army was reorganized under the command of Fairfax and Cromwell into what was to become known as the New Model Army, an inexhaustible source of preachers, authors, and radical activists. As is well known, these years saw the collapse of the system of censorship and control of the printing press, which produced an explosion of books and pamphlets and the expression of various forms of heterodoxy, usually interpreted by those who were frightened by them as a proliferating, heretical, sectarian breakdown.

The attribution of new ideas to religious sects is not a new phenomenon, in England or in the Netherlands, but it is rather striking for today's reader. The effervescence of ideas is attributed to a sectarian phenomenon. An author designated as a defender of new propositions or propositions in breach of political

or religious orthodoxies is invariably assumed to have had a sectarian education. This constant locating and thereby effective inventing of sects through their polemical designations—inventions either accepted or completely rejected by the targeted groups—is at the heart of the historiographical question of libertinism, because the “Libertines” come across as an established “sect” in the eyes of those who denounce them, which does not completely exclude the fact that some of them may have designated themselves as such at a given moment. That means, in the Protestant world, denounced by Calvin but also by the justice system that arrests them and, in certain cases, executes them. This sectarian interpretation of libertinism continues for quite a while, either through the stubborn belief in the existence of a sect bearing that name, or, more often, by identifying a given real or invented sect with the “Libertines,” as we have seen with the Anabaptists. In fact, there is no dissident group in England that has not been called “libertine” by theologians: Antinomians, members of the Family of Love, Arminians, Seekers, Ranters, Quakers, Fifth monarchists, etc.

The Antinomian Libertines and Radical Spiritualists

The two pamphlets in question, because of their contemporaneity and their form (short texts meant for a large, not necessarily cultivated, public), are themselves preoccupied with, if not obsessed by, the sectarian question. But, as we shall see, the one finds in libertinism the fatal issue of the sectarian and so-called spiritualist doctrines and practices (antinomian and libertine according to Calvin), while the other sees in the Libertine the figure of the epicurean hedonist and atheist.

The first pamphlet is entitled *A relation of severall heresies*. It is a small list of twenty sects that are presumed to be infecting the realm, associated with the names of the “ring-leaders” of the heretical authors, with information about their place of origin and the era in which they spread. It is an astonishing list—drawn up somewhat haphazardly—which gives a panoramic view of everything the Presbyterian church fought against and of everybody and everything the church feared regarding doctrinal and practical dissidence: Jesuits; Socinians; Arminians; Arians; Adamites; Libertines; Anti-Scripturians; Soule-Sleepers; Anabaptists; Familists; Expectants and Seekers; Divorcers; Pelagians; Millenarians; Anti-Sabbatarians; Anti-Trinitarians; Sabbatarians; Separatists; Apostolics; Antinomians. To comment on this list one has to start

from the notes, because most of the sections do not refer to existing groups, but to questions of doctrine, to particularities of cultural practice, even—one would say today—to social questions that disturbed contemporary England, such as the evocation of Milton's work propounding the legalization of divorce, which most certainly also pertains to religion.

How are the Libertines defined in this pamphlet of some twenty pages? The title of this particular part of the document could be more explicit: "Libertines that would abolish the Law" (*A relation of severall heresies* 8). These Libertines are Antinomians, to whom a short section is dedicated. Their leader is none other than Johannes Agricola,⁷ against whom Luther had written his treatise *Against the Antinomians*, thus inventing a word with a considerable heresiological future, particularly in England.⁸ The articles or doctrinal propositions that identify these libertines are the following:

1. That the Law was not given to Christians.
2. The Law pertains to the wicked, and not to the Godly.
3. The ten commandments are not to be taught in the Church, because they that are Regenerate need not the Law; because they do that duty willingly, being led by the Spirit.
4. That the Law is in no way necessary for our conversion.
5. It is sufficient for a wicked man to believe and not doubt of his Salvation.
6. Faith and the Gospel were unknown to Moses.
7. That good works cannot avail for salvation neither evil works hinder.
8. That Christians cannot be known by their works.
9. That the Rule of Law, is not a Rule of life. (*A relation of severall heresies* 8)

We have here something of a caricature of the antinomian teachings that nevertheless does not betray their spirit: the affirmation, based on St. Paul, that Christ has come to abolish the law and that the Elect fully enjoy in him the freedom of the spirit. What the Antinomians are then reproached for is their adoption of a theology that allows them to behave badly—to violate the Ten Commandments—while keeping a clear conscience, because, according to them, the sins of the Elect are no longer sins, since "for the pure all things are pure," according to the classic, reinterpreted adage. Because their doctrine authorizes moral libertinism, the Antinomians are called "Libertines." Indeed, most of the Antinomians, as has been proved by the scholars who studied

them, absolutely refused to subscribe to immorality and to confirm that, as the chosen ones, they could perform actions that were considered sinful without sinning (this rather concerns the perfectist doctrine attributed by Calvin to those called “Libertines”); most of them confirm that their election does not make them indifferent to sin, but does protect them against it, which is something entirely different.⁹ However, a marginal group has indeed taken this road, even going so far as to make sin, especially of the flesh, a practice of regeneration: some of them were called Ranters, and some of them explicitly assumed the mantle of libertinism, as we will see.

In addition to the articles summarizing (and caricaturing) antinomian libertinism, at the end of its catalog the *Relation of severall heresies* presents a series of “new errors tending to libertinism,” where one finds a number of propositions already stigmatized by Calvin in his pamphlet against the libertines:

1. That God hath a hand in; and is the authour of the sinfulness of his people.
2. That it is the will and command of God that since the coming of his sonne, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish or Antichristian consciences, and worship, be granted to all men in all nations and countreys.
3. That no man was cast into helle for any sinne, but onely God would have it so.
4. That man had life before God breathed into him, and that which God breathed into him was part of the Divine Essence, and shall return unto God again.
5. That the Prince of the Aire that rules in the children of disobedience is God, and that there is no other Spirit but one, which spirit is God.
6. That God hath not decreed all the actions of men because men doing what God decreed do not sinne.
7. That God was never displeas'd with men; for if he were and pleas'd again, then there is a changeableness in God.
8. That God loves not one man more than another before the world, neither is there any particular election, but onely generall and conditionall (upon perseverance), the Scriptures no where speaking or reprobates, or reprobation. (*A relation of severall heresies* 19)

Here we are confronted with the most serious heretical divergences that are moreover barely compatible among themselves: God is sometimes the author of sin while sometimes, on the contrary, it is the divine determinism of human actions that is refused. In general, however, what is denounced as libertinism is a pantheist deviation, something that could already be found in the stigmatization of the “libertines” in Calvin’s pamphlet. The spirit breathed into man is God; God saves everyone in the sense that, when dying, the spirit returns to God, because it *is* God; there is no hell, no castigation, the differences between religions do not matter, and so on. However, here also everything seems to indicate that such propositions were in effect defended, which means that such ideas really circulated, in a more or less clandestine manner, in seventeenth-century England. This would also explain why they are presented as “new,” compared to the ideas of the antinomian Libertines.

Libertinism, Great Vein of the Sectarian Monster

A very important detail must be added here. This brief heresiological *vademecum* is based entirely on a much larger and more important work published in the same year and of which it is a sort of partial vulgarization: *The first and second part of Gangraena* by Thomas Edwards, a Presbyterian theologian,¹⁰ who was for the radical English more or less what the Jesuit Garasse had been for the French libertines two decades earlier.¹¹ What *A relation of severall heresies* adds to its immediate source is the attempt to classify opinions according to distinct sects, thus contributing to a heresiological reclassification of a contemporary matter meant for a broad public.

The work of Edwards briefly deserves our attention because of the part libertinism plays in it. The text of *Gangraena* presents itself, in the continuation of its title, as *A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these four last years . . .* In this catalog we find all the errors listed in the anonymous pamphlet, but they more or less scrupulously refer to specific texts that for the most part have not been preserved and, in spite of textual deformations and exaggerations, it is possible to read it and to get an idea of the scope and the variety of heterodox ideas in those revolutionary years.

The work of Edwards is particularly interesting, compared to the pamphlet it inspired, because of the fact that he goes well beyond the classification mania of the classic heresiologies. In fact, he observes: “but rather do we not see by

experience, that both the severall kinds of sects, and most persons of each kinde, are compounded of many, yea, some of all: One and the same society of persons in our times, being both Anabaptisticall, Antinomian, Manifestarian, Libertine, Socinian, Millenary, Independent, Enthusiasticall?" (13). Thus the groups of independents are entirely composed and formed by people who in reality do not agree with each other.

But Edwards continues as follows: "strange monsters, having their heads of Enthusiasme, their bodies of Antinomianisme, their thighs of Familisme, their leggs and feet of Anabaptisme, their hands of Arminianisme, and Libertinisme as the great vein going thorow the whole; in one word, the great Religion of that sort of men in the Army [the famous New Model Army], is liberty of conscience, and liberty of preaching" (14). Thus libertinism is not a particular sect, but it is the blood irrigating all the other sects, and the religion that embraces all these sects, this libertine religion, is the religion of the "liberty of conscience."

However, for Edwards, one sect in particular is composed of libertines: the Seekers or Expectants, who appear in the 1620s and actually present themselves as a sort of anti-sect, putting themselves outside or in the margin of the churches while formally remaining members of one or other of them. The Seekers are fundamentally anticlerical; they reject all forms of organized cults and consider themselves "to be seeking" the truth. At the same time they doubt the dogmas of Christianity on many points while they tolerate a great variety of ideas and positions in their informal groups, like the Dutch Collegians. One could be tempted to associate them with skepticism in this respect, but the Seekers' unease and the doubts are generally inseparable from the obsessive idea of the imminent end of time: most of them are millenarians (which is why they are also called "Expectants"). Thus the Seekers are at the same time closest to and furthest from philosophical skepticism. This does not alter the fact that their rejection of the churches and of ceremonies, their appeal for an unlimited religious tolerance, and their doubts about certain dogmatic points make them Libertines *par excellence* in the eyes of Edwards and others.

Moreover, according to Edwards, there are more and more Seekers, alias "Libertines," people who have frequented separatist and independent sects and who "stumble" into the position of a "Seeker," which in his view is worse than the other sects because they are inevitably led to "a life of looseness and licentiousness" (Edwards 11). This argumentation perfectly resembles the one Gilbert Voet (Voetius) develops in his *De Atheismo* (1639), and one we see in many

other quarters. All describe this process of descending into hell, dragging along the bad Christians who refuse or leave the Calvinistic church and join sects, before inexorably falling into libertinism and atheism.¹² It thus seems to be the alleged moral dissolution that justifies Edwards when he considers the Seekers to be libertines, just as the *Relation of severall heresies* did for the Antinomians.

When Edwards asks himself what kind of people join the Independent sects, he establishes a whole psychological and moral taxonomy of deviation, distinguishing eight types of men and women, among them, not surprisingly, “Libertines and loose persons, who have a desire to live in pleasures, and enjoy their lusts, and to be under no government” (Edwards 153).¹³ Hence the moral question of licentiousness and the political question of disobedience, indeed of rebellion, are intimately linked. And there is a certain contiguity between and a circulation of the ideas of the Seekers and of the groups driven by political and religious claims during those revolutionary years that immediately follow the publications I refer to. This is particularly the case for those who were called, to their great chagrin, Levellers, of whom many seem to have been—and to have remained—Seekers (like William Walwyn) and who appeal for a constitutional remodeling of citizenship. Of course, one must also refer to the Diggers, whose spokesman Gerrard Winstanley advocated social egalitarianism and questioned private property.

Thus libertinism, which was stigmatized in England’s controversial and pamphleteering literature, brings together the rejection of the Law (Antinomianism), the rejection of the Churches and of political authority, and corresponds practically with the choice of a life of debauchery and licentiousness. That is why sectarian libertinism, as it is denounced in the texts, is, in fact, very similar—on this moral and practical level, which is the choice of a dissolute life—to epicurean libertinism, denounced elsewhere by the same authors.

The Hedonistic and Impious Libertine

Let us consider that other pamphlet from the same year of 1646 attributed to Samuel Sheppard, a royalist author committed to fighting the Independents and more particularly to combatting Lilburne and the Levellers. Entitled *The times displayed*, it contains a series of disputes in verse between the representatives of antagonist positions in matters of religion: Presbyterian versus Independent; Anabaptist and Brownist; Antinomian versus Familist; Libertine

versus Arminian; Protestant versus Papist. Sheppard's pamphlet and Edwards's book can appear somewhat surprising, because the figure of the Libertine has nothing to do, *a priori*, with that of the Seeker, nor with that of the Antinomian, even if the text presents a nice vignette of the destroyer of the Tables of the Law with the words "*Profane Liberty*" (Sheppard). Without any doubt this is a representation of Antinomianism, and this vignette can also be found elsewhere with the caption "*Libertin*" [sic].¹⁴

But the libertine in this duel in verse is a profane, epicurean, and atheistic libertine. The poem declares:

Give me the Joyes on Earth, and telle not me
 Of after hopes, future felicitie
 I tire to think on, the time present I
 Will spend in mirth, and pleasant jollitie
 Sit round my hearts, our heads with Ivie crownd
 Let quaffe Lyeus, and the healths go round
 And singing pearis, unto Ceres we
 Unto the Harpe, will foot it lustily
 While here I live, Ile spend my time in mirth
 Time is no more, when I am gone from earth
 This night Ile clip a beauty, would tempt Jove
 Equall to Juno, or the Queen of Love
 Away with this same fond Philosophie
 That tells, the soul lives to Eternitie
 Away with such vain fancies when we fall
 The soul dyes with the body, &c. (Sheppard 13)

This "&c." gives the impression that we are reading an incomplete quotation from some other work. In any case, these lines are immediately followed by a commentary, which is at the same time an explanation, a warning, and a refutation:

It hath been foretold by the Prophets and Apostles that such men the latter dayes shall afford, and our own age hath verified, their speech unto us, and even for the main question of the Resurrection whereat they stick so mightily, was it not plainly foretold that men should in the latter times say, where is the promise of his coming and even at this present time is there

not exceptions taken against the Creation, the Ark, and divers other points. The ground whereof is superfluity of wit, without ground of learning, which may be truly termed, *miser errorum et vitiorum nutrix*, now the chief cause of Atheism is Sensuality, which maketh men desirous to remove all stops and impediments of their wicked life, among which, because Religion is the chiefest, so as neither in this life without shame, they can persist therein, nor if that be true without torment in the life to come, they whet their wits to annihilitate the joys of heaven, wherein they see (if any such be) they have no part; and likewise the pains of hell, wherein their portion must needs be very great; they labor therefore, not that they may not deserve those pains, but that deserving them there may be such pain to seize upon them, but what conceit can be imagined more base, then that man should strive to persuade himself, even against the secret instinct (no doubt) of his own mind, that his soul is, as the soul of a beast, mortal, and corruptible with the body, against which barbarous opinion, their own Atheism is a very strong Argument. For were not the soul a nature separable from the body; how could it enter into discourse of things merely spiritual, and nothing at all pertaining to the body; surely the soul were not able to conceive anything of heaven, no not so much as to dispute against heaven, and against God, if there were not in it somewhat heavenly and derived from God, Thus much by the way. (Sheppard 13–14)

This apologetic note thus ends with a refutation of atheism based on the human intellectual capacity to formulate it. Without God and without the existence of an immortal soul one could not have ideas of a purely spiritual nature and therefore of God himself, whose existence the atheist denies.

This is an argument that can either sink or swim. Whatever the case, it is striking to note the millenarian tone of the commentary: the present diffusion of atheistic libertinism proves, in accordance with the Bible, that the end of world is nigh. The author is clearly influenced by the millenarian rhetoric, omnipresent in the writings of the Independents. And this invites us, once again, to make a clear and decisive separation, beyond the syntheses, between the sectarian excesses, even the most radical, and epicurean libertinism, which naturally mocks the idea of the end of the world, the election and the alleged faultlessness of the Elect. But in that case the word *libertine* would refer to two phenomena that are absolutely different and divergent.

In reality things are rather more complex, and this is what makes England a fascinating terrain for investigating libertinism. In fact, it cannot be denied that in this cauldron of ideas, positions, and commitments constituting the multiform movement of the Independents, even propositions verging on deism, on pantheism, and on a certain form of materialism were actually supported. As a matter of fact, we find a series of them in Edwards's list in addition to those already quoted and reproduced in the *Relation of severall heresies* as "new errors" of contemporary Libertines: those that defend an absolute ban on punishing any opinion in matters of religion; those that tend to identify God with nature; those which deny sin and hell; those that affirm the mortality of the soul. Or, for instance, article 83 in Edwards's catalog: "That the soul of man is mortall as the soul of a beast, and dies with the body" (22). This is a good example, since it is a proposition that seems to refer to Christian mortalism as it is advanced by the naturalist philosophers. But in reality things are more complicated, because mortalism had also been associated with Protestant radicalism, as far back as the origins of the Reformation, and in several forms: "psychopannychism," which considers the soul to be an incorporeal substance that becomes unconscious of itself after death until the Resurrection (the doctrine of the sleep of the souls, advanced by some anabaptists, mentioned, for instance, by Edwards in article 84); but also what is called "thnetopsychism," which does not consider the soul as a separate substance but as a vital force incapable of surviving after the body and which dies with the body, until the day of resurrection of the bodies and with them of the individual souls (in the appendices of *Leviathan*, Hobbes seems to defend a somewhat similar position). But there are even more radical forms: "annihilationism" or "Sadduceism," which considers that there is no form of individual mortality at all after death, maintaining that resurrection is spiritual and should happen in this life. Death, consequently, not only liberates the divine essence of the soul, which then returns to the divinity; the soul already participates in that divinity during physical life. This position seems to have been advanced by at least some of the followers of the Family of Love, and later, in the revolutionary period, by the antinomians denounced as Ranters (articles 83 and 89 of Edwards's catalog).¹⁵

Two Libertinisms?

There are consequently very strong parallels between the mortalism of the "spiritualists" and that of the "philosophers" (the case of Hobbes is particularly

clear), which deserve more thorough exploration than can be attempted here, but which, once again, lead to an association of spiritual libertinism and philosophical libertinism, rather than to an opposition between them.

But it is indisputable that the proximity between these two denounced forms of libertinism is undoubtedly the clearest, particularly with the radical Antinomians, who were called Ranters and who go so far as to proclaim their libertinism.¹⁶ However, in making the practices considered sinful a spiritual experience of regeneration, even a mystical one in relation to their belief in the imminent end of world, one could think that they could not be further from the philosophically inspired modern atheism. But in this case the effect of greater distance can transmute into closest proximity, if only because philosophical irreligion is not to be confused with pure and simple rational criticism: deism and pantheism are both especially susceptible to yield to forms of experience that are surprisingly similar to those proposed by the Calvinist dissidents in England or, in a completely different manner, to certain libertine forms of quietism observed in the Catholic world.

The Claim to Libertinism

In view of a history of ideas that pays the utmost attention to the battle of words, it appears vitally important that certain authors in England, antinomians associated with the label “Ranter,” have been able to claim their libertinism outright, in spite of the opprobrium systematically associated with that term. Moreover, this is sufficiently rare in the European panorama of the seventeenth century, that it deserves further attention.

We have uncovered a text entitled *Christ Alone Exhalted*, written by the antinomian Tobias Crisp in 1643, and others, written between 1649 and 1650, just before the Rump Parliament promulgated the Blasphemy Act or Blasphemy ordinance (9 August 1650), which led to the arrest and imprisonment of a number of alleged Ranters (Crisp 175–76). The most fully elaborated was written by Joseph Salmon, a preacher who, like so many that historiography calls radical, came from the New Model Army. The passage that interests us appears in a work entitled *Divinity Anatomized*, previously believed to be lost, but recently unearthed by Mario Caricchio, who is preparing its publication.¹⁷ The author proceeds to define what he calls “the true Libertine,” and immediately his debt appears toward the tradition of the free spirit or, to use Calvin’s language, toward the libertines who consider themselves spiritualists:

The true Libertine, is one that walks in the Spirit, is led by the Spirit, and so from under these carnal laws of bondage; he is free in all his actions, and in every performance; he is a son, not a servant, he acts towards God, not from duty, but liberty; he is merely passive, under the power of the Spirit, being led out according to divine motion; the new nature acts as in God, and from God, and therefore free; its the seed (or conception) of the free woman, it proceeds not from Sinai, but Sion; it is not borne after the flesh, it lives not in the flesh, its comes from Egypt, it lives in Canaan, or spiritual freedome and liberty. (Salmon)

The biblical source is Galatians 4.30, in which Paul allegorizes the two wives of Abraham (Sara and Agar) and their respective sons (Isaac, designated as heir, and Ismael), using them as symbols for two laws: the one coming from the Sinai and the one coming from Sion, the old and the new; the law of Moses and the law of Jesus Christ. This Pauline reference quite evidently plays a key role in antinomianism, because the law of Sinai is none other than the one expressed in the Ten Commandments. The true libertine is he who is liberated from the Commandments.

A little earlier Salmon writes as follows:

The true libertine is free of all things, he is free in all things, yet will be brought under the power of nothing; he is free to eat, he is free not to eat; he is free to the lowest form of worship, as by way of brotherly condescension, but not bound as by way of duty; he can speake in anothers languages, he can be a Jew to the Jew, as one without law, he can be all to all in their low and carnall attainments, he can observe a day, with them that observe a day, he can refraine with them that observe not, he lives in the highest attainment, yet can sit down in the lowest of Christs mansions.

Free from all forms of power, the libertine is, properly speaking, an anarchist of God, free to do as he pleases, first and foremost to conform or not to the laws and the obligations of the cult. Moreover, in classic Pauline form, he establishes a real theory of simulation and dissimulation motivated by a fraternal condescension (and not by the cynicism of personal interest) where it is advanced that even when conforming to the lowest rites, and thus those furthest from the truth, and when accompanying men in their most carnal behavior, he who is in the spirit does not sin.¹⁸ "All is pure for the pure," according to the

antinomian dictum. Salmon implicitly formulated a theory of disavowal for situations that required it, and it is true that there is no urge for martyrdom among the Ranters, who all publicly recanted their beliefs after being arrested (which nevertheless did not prevent them to continue to rant even in their recantations).¹⁹

The two other texts are excerpted from the writings of one the most important authors of “ranterism”: Abiezer Coppe, also a former preacher in the New Model Army and a former and disillusioned Leveller. Let us take first off this passage from a text published in 1649, entitled *Some sweet sips of spiritual wine*, so close to the text of Salmon that there must be a material link between them:

Isaac is the heire, (the son of *the freewoman*, not *Ismael* the son of the *bondwoman*), for he is cast out, and must be no longer heire with the son of the *freewoman*: For *Abraham* had two sons, the one by a bond maid (who is persecutor of all that are not *flesh* of his *flesh*, and *forme* of his *forme*;) the other by a *freewoman*, Jerusalem which is above, which is free; and the son of the *freewoman* is free indeed, and persecuted of all *flesh* and *forme*, (for every *forme* is a persecutor) but the son of the *freewoman*, who is free, and very free too – is also free from persecuting any—so, and more then so, the son of the *freewoman* is a Libertine—even he who is of the *freewoman*, who is borne after the Spirit. And (that which is borne of the Spirit, is Spirit,) thats the heire, which is hissed at and hated. (Coppe, *Sweet sips* 55)

He who is the son of the Spirit, he who lives in the Spirit and who *is* the Spirit (Coppe confirms the immanent presence of the Spirit in the chosen), that man is a Libertine, and he is called that way by those who hate him. That name is a term of abuse, but it is the name that fits him because he lives in the freedom of the Spirit.

Coppe is an extraordinary writer, with a feverish, faltering, inspired style, like no other; some of his texts possess an incomparable force and beauty. Coppe employs profanity and provocation, on paper as in real life; what he says and what we know of his own demonstrative and subversive actions testifies to that. This also applies to his specific theory of “levelling,” a pacifist one with an explicit refusal of “levelling by the sword,” one that is not just economic, since he repudiates the “levelling by the spade” of the Diggers, to the advantage of a systematic practice of inversion of the values. This is evident in a remarkable

passage from the first of his *Fiery flying rolls*, a work that was condemned by Parliament to be publicly burned because of its horrible blasphemies:

Not by sword; we (holly) scorne to fight for any thing, we had as live be dead drunk every day of the weeke, and lye with whores i'th market place, and account these as good actions as taking the poore abused, enslaved ploughmans money from him . . . we had rather starve, I say, then take away his money from him, for killing of men. (89)

Coppe appeals to God as the great Leveller who will force the “great ones” to bow “before those poore, nasty, lousie, ragged wretches” (*Fiery flying rolls* 90). This reflects in particular his own practice of spiritual emancipation and deification through confrontation of the low and the vile with human and social abjection. He himself tells us in the second *Fiery flying rolls* (ch. 5) how he has publicly demonstrated against high-ranking men and women in their carriages by holding out a hand while grinding his teeth and prophesying the imminent coming of the great divine leveller, embracing a poor man without a nose and giving him all his money, kissing the feet of tramps and beggars, and frequenting the gypsies and especially their women, dancing and copulating with them (Coppe, *Fiery flying rolls* 105). A deliberately transgressive behavior can be seen here, denouncing the hypocrisy of those who publicly proclaim Christian fraternity, but give alms to the poor as if they were dogs, keeping them out of doors.²⁰

As Pietro Adamo has shown, Coppe predicts and performs himself, by his own deeds, the prophecy of a political, social, and moral upheaval (Adamo 163). One need only read the beginning of the first *Fiery flying rolls*, with his praise of libertinism: “Thus saith the Lord, I inform you, that I overturn, overturn, overturn. And as the Bishops, Charles, and the Lords, have had their turn, overturn, so your turn shall be next (ye surviving great ones) . . .” (86). This reversal, this turnover, holds in the greatest contempt everything that is “honourable (both persons and things)” (Coppe, *Fiery flying rolls* 88). “Honour, Nobility, Propriety, Superfluity, &c. hath (without contradiction) been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtinesse, loftinesse, murder, malice, of all manner of wickednesse and impiety . . . As I live saith the Lord . . . I will plague your Honour, Pompe, Greatnesse, Superfluity, and confound it into parity, equality, community” (Coppe, *Fiery flying rolls* 88–89). This is an inversion or a practical reversal of all values, as Nietzsche would put it, but the core

of it, perfectly accepted, is a rebellion against all forms of social injustice and inequality. Coppe explicitly uses blasphemy as one of the possible means to bring about this reversal; we might say that he adopts a revolutionary practice of blasphemy and its self-fulfilling prophecy as a means to accomplish in discourse the reversal of false values.

His praise of libertinage and his embracing of the term “libertinism” itself are part of this practice of provocative inversion. It appears in what immediately follows the first sentence, the beginning of which has been quoted, where the divine prosopopeia continues: “. . . by what Name or Title soever dignified or distinguished, who ever you are, that oppose me, the Eternall God, who am Universall Love, and whose service is perfect freedom and pure Libertinisme” (*Fiery flying roll* 86). The service of God is the perfect liberty, i.e., a liberty that knows no greater liberty than itself, because it is the liberty of God himself: libertinism is none other than the completed doctrine of antinomianism and perfectism, inseparable from its practice through actions and behavior that accomplish the reversal of values and the overthrow of the social and moral order.

We can say once again that we are at the furthest removal from irreligious libertinism as practiced in the texts by those we call the “erudite libertine,” and who generally defended themselves as libertines, but if we resituate the constituent elements of this libertinism in the European history of religious dissidence and of the so-called popular forms of irreligion, the points of contact and interactions are multiple, first of all in the discourses regarding the practices and eventually in the practices themselves: from scandal to the use of alcohol and deliberate recourse to blasphemy, to curses, and, ultimately to the adoption of deviant sexual behavior, indifference toward religions, and a double strategy of superficial conformity and transgressive provocation. But this proximity, indeed contiguity, is particularly striking on the theoretical level, on a number of standpoints that need to be analyzed more thoroughly: the rejection of the notion of sin, of the rewards and punishments in the hereafter and, fundamentally, of any form of transcendency, in favor of an immanentist theology of the incarnate spirit barely indistinguishable from philosophical pantheism blindingly obvious to contemporary observers. This extreme spiritualism flirts with materialism: it is scandalous evidence for contemporaries and the best argument for demonizing one’s adversary, but the arguments for supporting this view are not lacking. Its watchword is *liberty* (or *freedom*), which allows the appropriation or re-appropriation of the words *libertine* and *libertinism*: divine liberty of the Spirit, liberty of the soul and liberty of thought, but also and

by extension the liberty of the body freed from norms, laws, rules, everything embraced by that abhorred word *form*. In the Ranter spiritualism of Coppe or Salmon, bodies are liberated by the Spirit and for the Spirit, while the Spirit delivers one from the law and, in so doing, abolishes sin. That is, moreover, because it is indissolubly spiritual and carnal that the process of liberation possesses such strong political connotations; the new liberty could simply not align itself with the ancient order of souls and bodies and with any exterior form of authority over spirits and bodies. That is this what is denounced as the “anarchy” of the Ranters.

The texts of Salmon and Coppe, with their overt claim to libertinism, admittedly provide an extreme example, but they allow us to discern a form of libertinage—and we can happily use the category in positive fashion, since Coppe and Salmon call themselves “libertines”—which would appear diametrically opposed to what historiography calls “erudite libertinage.” But these texts suggest that certain links exist among various phenomena, contemporary or not, that can be observed in Europe and beyond (notably in America), links that are apparently unrelated and subject—not by accident—to the same strident accusation of libertinism.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the international conference *De l'usage du terme “libertin”: Injures et controverses aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, 31 May–1 June 2011, in Brussels.

1. I discuss these issues elsewhere in “Libertino, libertinage, libertinismo : una categoria storiografica alle prese con le sue fonti,” “Libérer le libertinage: Une catégorie à l'épreuve des sources,” “Convergenze e divergenze tra ‘libertinismo’ naturalista e ‘libertinismo’ spiritualista nel Seicento: l'egualitarismo radicale nel *Theophrastus Redivivus* e nei testi di Gerard Winstanley,” and “L'histoire des ‘libertins’ reste à faire.”

2. For more information about *libertinage érudit*, see Pintard.

3. The pamphlet has been partly reconstructed based on extracts from Knox's answer (see following note), who quotes him abundantly.

4. “For first we are accused that we provoke men to a careles and libertine life. So that by us the people do nothing, [p]uteate and drink and ryse up to play” (Knox 192).

5. See Viret, *De origine*.

6. See Viret, *L'Interim*.

7. The source given is “Pontanus”: who is Gregory Bruck, counsellor of the Saxon Elector at the diet of Worms and author of a heresiological work.

8. Luther's work is translated in English in 1648 by Samuel Rutherford who, with Thomas Edwards, is the other great Puritan ironside of the antinomian libertines.

9. See, particularly, in a rather abundant bibliography, Adamo; see also Como.

10. For more information about Sir Thomas Edwards (1599–1647), see Hughes.

11. See Garasse.

12. "The Sect of Seekers growes very much, and all sorts of Sectaries turn Seekers; many leave the Congregations of Independents, Anabaptists, and fall to be Seekers, and not only people, but Ministers also; and whosoever lives but few yeers (if the Sects be suffered to go on) will see that all the other Sects of Independents, Brownists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, will be swallowed up in the Seekers, *alias* Libertines, many are gone already, and multitudes are going that way, and the issue of these Sects and Schismes will be, that all will end in a loosenesse and licentiousnesse of living" (Edwards 11).

13. "Libertines and loose persons, who have a desire to live in pleasures, and enjoy their lusts, and to be under no government, they are fierce and earnest for Independents, and against Presbytery" (Edwards 153n5).

14. See the pamphlet *A Catalogue of the Severall Sects and Opinions in England and other Nations: With a briefe Rehearsall of their false and dangerous Tenents*. The "libertine" is presented in this document in the following verses:

A pish sin and open violation
By wilfull lust, deserves just condemnation :
Repentance, though a Riddle, this Ile sat,
Thou must unfold the same or perish aye.
Then least this holy Law thou yet dost sleight,
Shall presse thee one day with a dreadfull weight. (n.p.)

15. See Maclear.

16. Cf. the polemic concerning the legitimacy of speaking positively about the sect of the Ranters, provoked by the work of Davis.

17. I thank Mario Caricchio very much for having forwarded this text.

18. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 9.

19. See Adamo and my article, "Persévérer dans la rétractation: l'abjuration feinte comme mode de communication oblique. Une histoire anglaise."

20. Coppe's phrasing reads "don't serve them as dogs, without doore" (*Fiery flying rolls* 90).

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