

## The Quietism of Isaac Penington

*A Study based on his Pamphlets of 1648-1650*

ISAAC Penington (1616-79), is the most impressive mystic the Society of Friends has known. Among the leaders of seventeenth-century Quakerism he placed greatest emphasis on the retired life with its discipline of self-denial, meditation and writing to support the uncertain seeker. He was the first effective spokesman for the contemplative side of Quaker life, and while not in disagreement with George Fox, he favoured less the active reformism that made Fox the undoubted leader of the Society. Penington seldom travelled in the ministry, regarding his Buckinghamshire house, the Grange, as a proper centre for worship and retreat. Even after losing this property, he remained in the neighbourhood, inhabiting houses which also served as retreats. The imprisonments which he was so ready to accept confirmed a solitary determination to testify against the world in his own way. The fruits of these long-withdrawn periods are found in the many Quaker pamphlets he issued between 1658, the year he joined the movement, and 1679, when he died. They show remarkable spiritual perception, evidently the work of strong inspiration, and they are well known under their seventeenth-century collected title, *The Works of the Long Mournful and Sorely Distressed Isaac Penington* (1681). But there is another forgotten side to Penington's writing, more daring and trenchant in manner, the work of an earlier period between 1648 and 1656, when he was still uncertain of what religious position to take. Like so many who eventually became Quakers, Penington searched assiduously among churches and sects which finally brought him to the followers of Fox. Their way gave him full satisfaction, and his Quaker pamphlets have a certainty and consistency of viewpoint lacking in the earlier series. But as records of doubt and search, and of urgent grappling with religious questions, the early pamphlets have a special interest. They are invaluable for those interested in the forming mind of a Puritan mystic. The remarks in this paper are therefore confined to the pamphlets of 1648, 1649 and 1650, the crucial years leading into the Commonwealth, and for Penington the years of greatest stress and uncertainty. The pamphlets

contain a kind of confession that emerges when they are read in sequence. They are both personal and impersonal, noting directions of change, not merely in his own views but in the views of his Puritan countrymen as they sought a basis for life without king or established church. He was extremely close to the radical element and his pamphlets mirror developments within the various branches of the reform party. As straight commentary on events they deserve more attention than they have had. But they are of interest in a still more significant way: they tell us something profound about seventeenth-century spirituality and despair. The background of Penington's mysticism requires examination before his position among the first Quaker writers can be fully appreciated. Penington was above all a quietist, whose concern was devotional. How this came about is largely explained by his early tracts, seen in connection with the known biographical facts. What we find is reformist zeal gradually modified by doubts about human nature until it turns into almost total otherworldliness. Penington learned despair of the world by bitter observation and experience. His quietism represents a side of the Puritan tradition that should not be overlooked.

Penington was among the articulate Puritans whose disillusionment with affairs of state promoted mystical withdrawal into the privacy of their inner lives and sometimes into the sects. The considerable movement in that direction showed frustration with political actualities. Whether it was the building of a Christian Utopia proposed by Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers or the singular act of John Saltmarsh who used his chaplaincy in the New Model Army to issue a prophetic warning to Oliver Cromwell, the intention was the same. The world as it was had to be repudiated before a better one could be built. The struggle for liberty of conscience was itself a source of frustration giving rise to extreme forms of protestantism, and this could only prompt some to look beyond human society to an ideal spiritual resolution of its differences. Penington's pamphlets speak for those who in their reaction to religious and political distress set out on a mystical quest for timeless unity. Direct contact with the divine through illumination promised hope of rest; yet the radical Puritan who sought eternity within time was both a separatist and

separatism's most fervent opponent. He was caught in a paradox of extremes preventing compromise, so that when the revolution entered its Protectorate phase all that he could do was to cherish the light already shown to him and look to its source for more. He had to live at the very edge of consciousness where the human and divine grow indistinct; he had sought to convince others of the rightness of his way in a desperate attempt to restore Christian unity. But the harder he pressed, supported by private illumination, the more fixed in a misunderstood minority position he found himself. Suspicion and mistrust were often the results of his labours. This was a typical situation in religious minorities, and it was certainly Penington's. Hence the vigour of his self-examination and questioning of positions taken by others; but doubt did not answer his need. Some kind of certainty growing out of private illumination had to be reached. Private certainties lent little stability; a society of the like-minded who spoke for basic Puritan aims in the language of mysticism could sustain him. A society of quiet people removed from the world is what he envisaged as political hope dwindled; what would seem excessive concern with the Ranters is evidence of this.

Penington was destined for Quakerism from the beginning; he had long been preparing for the decisive meeting at John Crook's in 1658. Joining the community of worship relieved him of his extreme minority position and stabilized his thought. There was nothing left for him to do. Cromwell's death in 1658 intensified religious confusion and made it less likely that the paradox of sectarianism would be resolved in a godly state. All that could be hoped was that a witness would be kept to the truth that had been seen. As his letters to Richard Cromwell show, Penington was among the first to see that the chance for a full-scale spiritualization of life had been lost. The work now was to salvage the pure seed and nourish it quietly. Thus Penington moved cautiously with a sense of the limitations upon him when he joined the Friends. The increasing quietism of the early pamphlets prepared for the contemplative Quakerism Penington adopted. Complete disengagement from politics may have seemed artificial but it is what he came to want. Abandonment of self-will to the divine was the only cure for perverse human nature, an attitude not at all unique. His had been

a species of the spiritual withdrawal found elsewhere in seventeenth-century literature, for example, in the poetry of George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvell. Their desire was for inner solitude in the midst of national chaos, and physical removal to houses in the country played a necessary part. Penington began his return from this mystical alienation to give his talent as a publicist to the growing sect. But his message is always one of inward search for self-knowledge, for contemplative quietism and separateness from the world. It is a quietism based on reservations about both reformed and orthodox religion that became serious enough to make us wonder whether his unstated aim was not a kind of spiritual self-annihilation. The early pamphlets help explain this dark side of his religion, but they lead directly to the first attempts at consolidating his mature views in *The Life of a Christian* (1653) and *Divine Essays* (1654), pamphlets which lie just outside the time of crisis. This discussion, therefore, stops short of them in the hope of making plain the stages through which he passed in the years of greatest flux.

Why was Penington not more eager to join in the main action of Puritan reform? Why did he turn away from the very resolution that promised a rule of saints? His special position as a doubter, who nevertheless had the revolution's aims at heart, can be seen as a reaction to his father, Alderman Isaac Penington, an influential parliamentarian from the City of London and a prime mover in the struggle to destroy episcopacy and monarchy. Not only did Alderman Penington use his connections among City merchants and Independent churchmen to raise money for the Parliamentary army, he took an active part in carrying out reforms. He championed the extirpation of Popish tendencies in the church, and it was with satisfaction that when Archbishop Laud went to the scaffold in 1645 Alderman Penington conducted him there. His reforming zeal led him into complicity in the execution of Charles I four years later, though charges to that effect were never fully proven. He was clearly among the harsher kind of Puritans who were willing to do the Lord's work swiftly with force. From this practice the younger Penington dissented, mourning over his father's mistaken use of power. A quietist from the start, there is nothing to show the least sympathy with militant politics; reform was necessary, but

the coercive methods being used were wrong. Had the younger Penington viewed the workings of the revolution from a greater distance he might not have been so disturbed by them; as it was he mistrusted the whole programme. Thus, while acquiring radical convictions naturally, he modified the punitive Calvinism of his father into a gentler religion of love and despair. Penington developed a quietist Puritanism through mystical submission to the will of God. Contemplation and attendance on the Holy Spirit were substituted for the aggressive headlong action of the Puritan men of power and for the fanaticism urged by those who knew they would never have power. Penington's dominantly inward religion, springing from an overwhelming sense of immanence, fills everything he wrote with prophetic ardour that combines with the shrewd incisiveness of his social observation. He could be both prophetic and sharply analytic, both hopeful for the millennium and darkly pessimistic about the ability of man to heed the signs of God. His language typically opposes the paradisaical imagery of light, life and love to that of darkness and negation. The difficulties of resolving himself about the perfectibility of God-ordained human institutions were almost insuperable and the tensions set up by his inner debate gives his prose its urgency.

Some of the reasons for the neglect of Penington's pre-Quaker pamphlets are evident. Although he was deeply concerned with national affairs he was never a public figure. His detachment conferred advantages, but it prevented him from strongly influencing the debates which shaped national policy. Further, as the chances of complete reform in church and state diminished, his embracing of apocalyptic and then mystical religion, leading to his joining an oppressed minority that had little hope of political influence after the restoration, put him outside the circles of greatest influence. As a pamphleteer he was caught up in the excitement of the Puritan revolution and its aftermath, yet in the actual events of the day he stood well to one side as a commentator and man of conscience. The activists, like Prynne, Cromwell, Lilburne and Milton, who carried into the public arena their reformism in religion and radicalism in politics, deserve their prominence, but Penington's significance should not be underestimated. In his hope to see the revolution perfected without loss of principle, he sought to guide the activists

from behind the scenes, reminding them what their true mission was, how God's will for the nation was to be interpreted and how original Puritan idealism might be preserved amidst the confusion of political upheaval. These were his aims when he emerged in print in 1648. The revolution was all but accomplished and the Commonwealth about to be set up, as debate about forms of government raged. He had long been watching events in London and had good reason to doubt whether the final phase of revolution would meet the high expectations held for them. But the revolution took its downward course despite his warnings, and his importance as a theoretician of political reform remained small. Nevertheless, Penington's writing had considerable impact on sectarians and did much to shape their thought by reasserting what was best in early Puritanism and linking it with the European mystical tradition. His pamphlets successfully turned attention to an inward religion offering more than mere separation from the Church of England. But most important, they helped re-evaluate the assumptions underlying religious developments of his time; his doubts were as important as his certainties and they contribute greatly to our understanding of why, instead of the Puritan millennium, a plurality of sects carried its much-diminished programme into the Restoration period.

Misgivings about the future of reformist Puritanism pervade Penington's writings. The search for Christianity, qualitatively different from the one that had produced warring factions, was announced in *A Touchstone or Tryall of Faith* (1648): "It is high time to look out after some other place and certainty of entertainment there, when this earth by its continuall shaking and cracking under us, doth so often threaten that it will not long support us."<sup>1</sup> Penington wanted the settling of affairs in the state according to the highest principles of brotherhood and, if that was impossible, he wanted an alternative community where brotherhood could be attained. Thus a Quaker quietism is anticipated in his first pamphlet. Indeed we find a shocked sense of the revolution's destruction of Christian unity throughout the pamphlets. The central argument of *A Touchstone* is that a

<sup>1</sup> Penington, *A Touchstone or Tryall of Faith, By The Originall from whence it springs, and the Root out of which it grows*, 1648, Sig. A2. [Wing, *Short-title catalogue* . . . 1641-1700, P 1216].

complete rebirth and change of direction would be necessary before Puritan ideals could be realized. This pamphlet's theme is spiritual rebirth, taking as its central text John i. 12, 13 to make an unfavourable comparison of observed Christian practice with that of primitive times. Although the tone of the pamphlet is not despairing, the difficulties in the way of personal rebirth, which would necessarily precede national rebirth, are recognized as formidable. But there remained a hope that men would want to change for the better. It is in the next pamphlet that this hope seems to have been dashed; there is not a more powerful confession of pessimism in Puritan literature than Penington's second public utterance, almost certainly inspired by the abrupt dislodgement of the monarchy.

In 1649, the year of the King's execution, Penington's view of human nature reached its darkest. Perhaps no event of the revolutionary period caused such a lasting sense of horror mingled with excitement as did the judicial murder of Charles I. Many in the reform party were appalled by the lengths to which a minority had gone in the supposed service of principle. Although Penington does not refer to it directly, the regicide undoubtedly convinced him that divisive forces had triumphed; his reaction was immediate and profound. The settling of the new Jerusalem could not now be looked for until there had been a thoroughgoing change of heart, an honest confrontation of the human situation. The resulting pamphlet, portentously called *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times Represented in a Mapp of Miserie: or A Glimpse of the Heart of Man* (1649) vigorously analyses the distempers which had led to spiritual breakdown in the revolutionary party. The pamphlet is explosive with the fierce energy of disillusionment, and yet it pleads again for rebirth in the spirit. The manner is bold and incisive, marking a change from the preceding pamphlet which had been "Intended Not for the disquiet of any . . ." Penington's intention was to arouse his countrymen to a passionate rededication, to show them their wickedness and inspire change. The prose is measured and controlled, not in the least ill-considered or disorganized. Penington knew precisely what had to be said, having become convinced that no mere political remedy would cure the ills of church and state; a deeper inward disorder had to be faced first in all its un-

pleasantness. It was the universal "black dark Self" so often denied, "that filthiness which every man thinks he is free from, and yet the heart of every man is full of" that Penington drew to the attention of his readers.<sup>1</sup> There was no venom in his words, only despair, as he pointed out the iniquity of believing that one party alone—the King's, Parliament's or Army's, the Episcopal, Presbyterian or Independent—could hold all the truth. Bigotry had become the barrier to national as well as Christian unity and concessions had to be made if the vision of brotherhood was ever to be regained.

Who imagines, while he cries out against Pride, Covetousness, Cruelty, Treason, Heresie, Blasphemy, &c. that he himself is the spring whence these issue, and where they would live and flourish, if all the outward appearances of them were cut off?<sup>2</sup>

These words are the logical extension of the early Puritan injunction to search and know the heart in both its goodness and corruption. To be entirely stripped of illusion was to give the divine light of God access, to open the way for purgation and rebirth.

The pamphlet was not meant to stir further ill-feeling but to show the root causes of ill-feeling. Its powerful condemnation of human nature was backed by the assurance that a higher being stood ready to help the struggling creature once his corruption had been exposed. The deep therapy of regeneration called for giving up all illusions, but it was not in itself destructive. This is shown in the way the argument is set out in four propositions: that the heart is above all deceitful, that it is desperately wicked, that there is universal ignorance of man concerning his heart, but that nevertheless God continually searches the heart hoping to effect a cure. In Penington's view man condemns himself to error; he is deeply untrustworthy and in need of forced confrontation with the truth about his self-seeking. Penington wrote less to prompt political reform than to show the necessity for total submission to God. His mistrust of man is particularly evident in the harsh remarks on the insidiousness of self-deception.

The heart "has deceits and skill to cozen itself with: It can seem to hate sin, and make it self beleve it doth hate sin; all manner

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times*, 1649, Sig. A2. [Wing P1170].

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



of sin, its own beloved sin, its inmost sins most, and yet all this while hugg, cherish, imbrace, enjoy them; unseen, unknown to itself: it can kisse sin and suck the sweetness of sin, even in those very prayers it seems to put up against sin, and of that very sin which it seems in its own spirit to be most fearfull of, and most bent against."<sup>1</sup>

No amount of well-intentioned heart searching could expose all that needed to be known. In taking this view Penington departed from the optimism of earlier Puritan teaching, that of John Dod, for example, who had said "we must digge and search into our consciences, and when we find any corruption therein, we must cast it forth."<sup>2</sup> After the violent upheavals of church and state it was no longer so easy to speak this way. Human nature had come to seem incorrigible and the heart so wicked that it could not be serious about attaining saving knowledge. Penington flatly asserted that "Man is not capable of knowing his own heart, it is too bigg for him to comprehend, too vaste, too deep for his shallow brains, to receve the knowledg of."<sup>3</sup> God alone could take charge and is pictured as a wholly transcendent being who will "work to search out [Man's] filth, to fetch it up out of this dark depth, and set it in order before his and others eyes."<sup>4</sup> In suggesting this, Penington seems to half-recognize the presence of a sub-conscious mind with all its secret contents and unpredictable violence. If, as Lancelot Whyte has argued, "the seventeenth century was the first period when the individual's experience of 'consciousness' and 'self-consciousness' was isolated and treated as a primary concept or value," we can understand how it was that Penington was able to detect that portion of mental activity which is evidently present but not easily controlled by the will.<sup>5</sup> He plainly suggested that the springs of action lie below the level of conscious control producing wickedness which pious intentions could not touch. But, he believed, so do God's promptings come from within, when the good is able to disentangle itself from the evil. The exact operation of this is left unclear in Penington's writing; he had little of Hobbes's skill in systematic psychology. In any case, he

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dod, *Seven Godlie and Fruitfull Sermons*, 1614, p. 63. [STC. 6944].

<sup>3</sup> I. Penington, *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> L. L. Whyte, *The Unconscious before Freud*, 1963, pp. 37-8.

called for the total submission of the erring self to the other, the divine light which burned both within and without the mind. This was the submission on which the future of Puritan reform depended, put here uncompromisingly in the language of someone who has thrown aside all caution to tell the truth as he sees it. The language is colloquial with strong biblical overtones and the note of personal involvement is insistent throughout. No reader of *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times* will doubt the seriousness and forceful simplicity of Penington's response to what the revolution disclosed about human nature.

Man hates every thing but himself. He hates man, he hates God. The haters of God, it is a Scripture phrase, and it is that which is the temper of man, it might be used for one of the most proper descriptions of him. Would you know what man is? why, this he is, one that hates God, and all thoughts of reconciliation and union with him.<sup>1</sup>

The cumulative effect of his indictment of unregenerate human nature is overwhelming. A reader who was in doubt about his meaning when he referred to the self as "the strange woman that flattereth thee with her lips, alluring thee from chaste and pure embraces of thy first love into her unclean bed," would have realized quickly that the Whore of Babylon was by turns the King's party, the Parliament and the Army, all of which fell short of their professed righteousness.<sup>2</sup> But to condemn was not Penington's natural inclination, and the mystic in him recoiled at the harshness of his own words. They were, however, necessary to explain why "God should deal sharply with us, why he should chide and fight with any of us, why he should contend with the man in us."<sup>3</sup> The unprecedented troubles in the nation seemed nothing less than the beginning of a judgment which was to fall indiscriminately on all, at its completion establishing the English nation on a far sounder footing. He was hopeful that, when the process of purgation was complete, happiness would at last be secure, yet this seems a faint hope at the end of a so deeply disillusioned piece of writing.

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times*, p. 18. It should be said that Penington was not the only one to use such virulent language. See for example Humfry Chambers, *A Motive to Peace and Love Delivered in a Sermon at Pauls the first Lords Day in June, 1648, 1649*. [Wing C916].

<sup>2</sup> I. Penington, *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times*, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The horror and pity that Penington felt when he viewed the England that had endangered its chance for full spiritual liberation was not less than that of the disappointed Milton when he wrote *Paradise Lost*.

In 1650, the first precarious year of the Commonwealth, Penington issued five pamphlets<sup>1</sup> combining astute political observation with exhortation to the distracted people of England to draw themselves together into a new and more godly brotherhood. While it is difficult to be certain about their exact order of issue, there is no difficulty in finding the direction of Penington's thought. From the arguments for good government offered in *A Word for the Common Weale*<sup>2</sup> (the date which Thomason<sup>3</sup> corrected to 15th Feb. 1649 [1650]) it is significant that Penington moved in the next year towards greater interest in the emergent prophetic sects that seemed to signal the spiritual rebirth for which he called. Political theorizing, temporarily at least, seemed irrelevant. There is a growing concern with the antinomian element in the divided church and a new note of personal urgency in the frequent passages of spiritual autobiography. The pamphlets of 1650 represent a refinement of Penington's religious and political position but they are more tentative and uncertain than *The Great and Sole Troubler of the Times* (1649). As documents of their time they are of considerable interest, and despite formlessness in design, contain passages of great insight and beauty.

It is as well to look briefly at *A Word for the Common Weale* (1650), addressed to a sick nation whose physician, the parliament, had lost touch with the people and their needs. The new government was a welcome change from tyranny, the argument runs, but the people had not yet felt its benefit; government was too centralized and concerned

<sup>1</sup> *A Word for the Common Weale tending towards the begetting and continuing, a right understanding and good opinion betweene the Parliament and the People* [Wing P1148]; *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness: containing in it a few Words to Christians about the late and present posture of Spiritual Affairs among them* [Wing P1217]; *Light or Darknesse, Displaying or Hiding itself, as it pleaseth* [P1177]; *Severall Fresh Inward Openings, (Concerning severall things) which the Day will declare of what Nature they are* [P1189]; *An Eccho from the Great Deep: Containing Further Inward Openings* [P1163].

<sup>2</sup> Wing P1148.

<sup>3</sup> In the collection of Civil war tracts made by George Thomason and presented in 1762 to the British Museum by George III.

with internal disputes, too unsure of its way forward, to bring about a political reordering, let alone the spiritual reawakening of England. The reasons could be traced in the flaws of human nature itself but, Penington suggested, some remedy was nevertheless possible. The text of the pamphlet, advanced in a strong clear prose, challenges parliament to establish sound self-limiting laws that could be executed according to rule. The trouble with the late King was that too much liberty had led to arbitrary action, to which the parliament in its ascendancy had also become liable. The argument for establishing clear principles of reason to guide parliament was based on the realistic assumption that if exploitation of power were possible it would come about, no matter what the will of the people had been. In this sense Penington was no utopian, nor did he so uncritically support the Commonwealth as did his friend, the Independent minister, John Goodwin.<sup>1</sup> He was, rather, humanitarian in his concern for the people, a John Lilburne without a programme. Clear principles agreed upon at this turning point, Penington believed, would prevent encroachment by the parliament or army on the people, or the reverse. His careful analysis of the dangerously unstable political situation in 1649-1650 placed Penington among the more sober critics of the revolution; his caution was exemplary and the position he took above reproach by any in the reforming party who had the people's welfare at heart. It may have been the very high-minded unassailability of his position that accounted for the neglect of his arguments by other theoreticians then writing. In any case, he turned from political to religious matters with a sense of their overriding importance at a time when power seemed to be everything.

While approving only with reservations the political revolution, he wholeheartedly welcomed the spiritual ferment underlying it. In spiritual turmoil, he thought, the hope of ultimate deliverance lay. The following four pamphlets of 1650, then, attempt to clarify the sort of regeneration to be looked for. What could be expected from the clamorous sects that had so recently burst upon the scene? How could their torment be guided into paths of regeneration? Which

<sup>1</sup> John Goodwin (1594-1665), *D.N.B.*

of their apocalyptic expectations were justified and which were deluded? Penington approached these questions with caution and some scepticism but it is clear that his personal interest, his mysticism in fact, powerfully attracted him to other illuminists whose numbers were increasing. One might conclude from the Preface to *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness* that he had ceased to look to political methods for the successful completion of the reformation; indeed, he wrote that those who desired "Universal Freedom" and "Universal speedy impartial Justice" might have done better to submit to the yoke, not abjectly but in the expectation of divine, not human, deliverance, but he was merely saying that he hoped more from God than from man, who seemed blown upon and withered. The challenge was to discover God's will for the nation, and the best index of that seemed to be what was happening to the sectaries about whom he remarked that some were

scattered this way, some that way; some settled this way, some that way; some bewailing themselves under their Scatterings, others blessing themselves in their Setlings; some seeking, and others glorying, in what they imagine they have found; some complaining of the breaches growing greater and more Spiritual, others crying out as fast, that their Antidotes, plaisters and arts of healing, which would easily help all, were not embraced.<sup>1</sup>

A word of explanation will help to bring the social situation into focus. During the 1650's numerous sects became active but the most spectacular of them were the loosely related Ranter sects who claimed that divine inspiration exempted them from any authority external to themselves. They held that the spirit's leading was sufficient to excuse them from the moral law which, their detractors charged, they freely transgressed. The Ranters became a law unto themselves, earning the name of blasphemers who were regarded as a menace to the social order. Their extremism resulted in severe ordinances against them, but to Penington, disillusioned with man-made revolution, they seemed the harbingers of a new spirituality. He thought that they might be precisely what he was looking for, a sanctified people willing to break with political scheming and unhappy church wrangling to attend only to the guiding Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness*, 1650, Sig. B1. [Wing P1217].

It is easy to see how his strictures on human nature led him to this position. There was nothing left for man but to deny his creaturely self and lay himself open to direction by the Holy Spirit. If this were done with dedication and consistency, social relations would be transformed as God intended. But the means of judging what was a true dispensation were uncertain, there being no fool-proof test for authenticity of revelation laid down in scripture. It was left to the observant individual to apply such tests as he could devise, and it was in this exercise that Penington engaged in his pamphlets of 1650.

*A Voyce out of the thick Darkness*, which Thomason dated 1st April 1650, makes clear the terms of Penington's call to renunciation. Convinced more than ever that the nation was living through last times, he wrote: "There is a Consumption determined to pass through the whole earth, upon every earthly person, and every earthly thing in persons truly spiritual."<sup>1</sup> When all that was not pure spirit was thrown together in an apocalyptic upheaval then, he asked, "what will become of persons who have very little better then a Form, whether of Presbytery, Independency, Anabaptism, or any other kinde?"<sup>2</sup> There was no threat in this, only expectation based on biblical prophecy, for the failure to order affairs in church and state left no alternative but to expect a swift judgment. There is a new note of urgency in what Penington wrote:

If ever there was a time for tears without, and grief of spirit within, this seems the season: when after such an expectation of Light and Glory, of Settlement and Establishment in the things of God, such thick darkness, such universal shame, such dreadful Shatterings, have so apparently overtaken us, and are so likely dayly more and more to overtake us. Not only our Superstruction, but our very Foundation is shaken; and when we have striven and tryed to the utmost to settle again, we may be forced at length to confess, that there is no setling any more upon it, but we must come to a deeper bottom, or sink for ever.<sup>3</sup>

We have seen that Penington believed the deeper bottom might be established by the sectarians. The pamphlet is not a finished statement but an exploration of this possibility; it does not develop in an ordered way but moves by nervous

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

abruptness from section to section. Inserted between "A Post-Script About Darkening the Counsel of God" and "Certain Scripture-Prophecies" we find a brief section addressed to "those who speak such lofty language with such high confidence, saying God is All. There is nothing besides the Lord. All is good. All is alike, &c." These were the Ranter tenets that Penington was to prove either misled or inspired. If their light had been that of "inward and spiritual understanding" then Penington hastened to accept its authenticity. He allowed their claims even if they were in a state of uncertainty, but if, as was entirely possible, the Ranter's new notions merely inhabited the "old vessel," the creaturely imagination or understanding, they were an abomination to be purged. He was severe against the unredeemed flesh entertaining notions of its own virtue ("she loves to get upon the pinnacle of knowleg"<sup>1</sup>) when it was self that had to be put down. It was evidence of pure mystical passivity, absolute obedience, that Penington looked for as the way through the political and religious impassé. The mystical temperament comes out more strongly in the next pamphlet.

*Light or Darknesse, Displaying or Hiding it self, as it pleaseth*, which Thomason assigned to 22nd May, 1650, opens with a personal confession revealing what at first looks like a sharp turning towards antinomian irrationality. Penington seems to have had at this time religious experience that destroyed all confidence in earlier divine favour and in natural reason. He described himself as being "so toss'd and tumbled, melted and new-molded, that I am changed into that which I thought it utterly impossible for me ever to be. I am grown at peace, if not in love, with folly."<sup>2</sup> A loss of former wisdom and a new passive moulding in the hands of an "unknown Potter" mark this phase of Penington's quest. It was a condition of utter abandonment to this unnamed will and a readiness to follow it anywhere, no matter the cost in social disapproval. Offensiveness did not matter at a time when new light was breaking, light intelligible only to the changed nature. Penington had in mind the folly of Christ that confounded the wise; a higher obedience would bring man-made disputes under control. This seemed

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *A Voyce out of the thick Darkness*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> I. Penington, *Light or Darknesse*, Sig. A2v. [Wing P1177].

to him the last refuge in the unabated party strife that aroused in each contender claims to exclusive truth. By appealing to higher principle against enmity, rage and excessive zeal he was showing the way to a resolution of disputes by denying their final importance since in the true mystical life they would be irrelevant. There follows in "The Preface" to "A Sermon to All Sorts of People" (concerning God's destruction of the perfect and wicked alike) an example of Penington's most potent style. It is a style in which the impact of the words counts for everything, yet the structure of thought remains entirely sound, while driven by "a kinde of inward impulsion."

O what a brutish thing is man, that can never beleeve or be made sensible of any thing, until he come to feel it! Though houses round about him be on fire, and he have that within which kindles the flame, yet he makes no question but he shall live secure. From the day that Man has been upon the face of the Earth, still has he been blessing himself, and pleasing himself with his own condition, magnifying it beyond others (whom he is very wise in accusing and condemning,) in the mean while not truly knowing, either whence he came, what he is, or whither he goes. O foolish justifier of thy self, O foolish condemner of others, being ignorant both of thy self, and others! Thine eye is dark, The light whereby thou seest is darkness; What meanest thou to be so forward & confident in judging either thy self or others? O God, put out this eye of Man, put out this light of Man, cover it with an Eternal Night. Bring forth a true, a substantial state of things, with an Eye that may behold it, an Heart that may comprehend it, a Life that may quicken and live in it.<sup>1</sup>

It appears from this and from "A Letter Impleading A Conversion," inserted in the pamphlet, that despite apparent antinomian sympathies, Penington remained staunchly independent in judgment, certain that all selfishly human desires would be confounded in a larger evolving plan. Self-appointed prophets and those with vain notions would be brought low:

I like well to see the creature with its waxed wings mounting up towards Heaven, and soaring aloft beyond the reach of the sight of its fellow creatures: But I like it much better to see the wax melted by the heat of the Sun, and the poor foolish forward creature tumbling down into the Sea, or unto the Earth again.<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of the pamphlet, including "Several Inward Openings," is a warning to fallen man, still convinced of his

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *Light or Darknesse*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.



righteousness, that a judgment was taking place, as indeed it must have seemed to many.

When we come to the pamphlet entitled *Severall Fresh Inward Openings* (which Thomason assigned to 20th July 1650), we find the same desire to promote national unity coupled with burning conviction that apocalyptic times were at hand. "Who knoweth," he wrote in the preface, "how sweetly and harmoniously we lay tumbling together in the same womb of Eternity, before we were brought forth in these severall strange shapes, wherein we now appear?"<sup>1</sup> But the chance had been lost for the simple political resolution of difficulties, so Penington turned to the only remaining hope:

The time is at hand, wherein time shall be no more; and then whatever had a Being in time, shall cease from so being any longer. We must all to the grave, to the dust; We must all sleep an Eternall sleep, when once the last Night comes; where we shall bury all our quarrels and contentions, and awake in perfect life and love: and then we shall be, both to our selves and to one another, what now we cannot so much as desire to be.<sup>2</sup>

With this he in effect dismissed himself from the public realm "to lament and bewail that Misery and Desolation, which is seizing upon all things." His plea was again for understanding, "a more piercing eye, which is able to look through all this," preserving the detached onlooker from the full measure of suffering which those blinded by pride might expect.<sup>3</sup> In no pamphlet is the sense of exasperation and helplessness greater for, as tensions grew among sects and parties, so did the necessity to leave affairs entirely in the hands of God. Penington was unusual among pamphleteers in his attempt to rise above the situation exercising so many to purely partisan efforts. The text concerns reconciliation and union which it seemed God might still effect but wholly on his own terms. Again Penington tried to point out how illusory were the objectives for which the factions were warring by using the image of the artificial partition, a wall which when pulled down revealed that the ground beneath was the same on both sides. Image and illustration enliven the arguments suggesting that Penington knew preaching

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *Severall Fresh Inward Openings*, Sig. A3-A3v. [Wing P1189].

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. A3v-A4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. A4.

methods well, but above all he was a Puritan publicist in whose sentences the abrupt, almost broken movements both convey and hold in check the emotion with which they were written.

The plea to reconsider hardened positions was not merely emotional and apocalyptic, it was solidly rational. He saw as clearly as anyone the spectre of social chaos. Despite repeated appeals for divine intervention, responsibility for improving the state of affairs was after all placed with his countrymen. Earnest pleading is curiously combined with the deep disillusionment that made Penington say that only in newness of spirit could perfect union be brought about. The main work of the pamphlet is to offer an elaborate proof to persuade Christians of the need for greater seriousness in their profession. The strongest words of admonition, however, were reserved for "The Mad Folks," no longer inspired fools in the sense used earlier, but those numerous persons whose religion had deranged them. They were a cause for wonder being "so slain to [their] Religion, that the very sweetness, life, vigour, power, purity of it [stank in their] nostrils."<sup>1</sup> If this were true spiritual death it might anticipate rebirth, but Penington doubted that it was. Their setting up of "all manner of sin, wickedness, filthiness, abomination" as a testimony against the empty forms of Christianity was dangerously self-deceived.<sup>2</sup> When he warned against being "too forward to throw away Christ, and Salvation by Christ" he was not affirming an orthodoxy but counteracting an extremism, the danger of which was manifest.<sup>3</sup> In a personal letter to a Ranter printed following "A Word to the Mad Folks" he was more particular in his criticism, asking for the full arguments in support of the proposition "That God is all, that all things are good, that all things are alike, &c."<sup>4</sup> The warrant for sinful behaviour could not be an expression of "Original Light." Self-deification was abhorrent, yet it was to the sense of God within that Penington appealed when he asked for completion of the spiritual revolution begun in the last century by Puritan reformers. The dilemma presented by the Ranters

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *Severall Fresh Inward Openings*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

seemed inescapable; if they were judged in error, and untrue to their calling, it had to be said what true obedience was, and moreover shown how it was exemplified. To escape the problem Penington resorted to a sort of confession, characteristic of the left-wing Puritan pamphleteers—Nayler, Lilburne, and Winstanley, for example.

To look upon my self as God by virtue of a Notion (how ever conveyed or received) and finde my self but a Creature in life, in motion, in power, is very irksom to a Noble Spirit, which loves not to make a sound above what it is or feels. This I have felt, Power enough to batter to confound me in every thing; but no power to build any thing, or so much as to fix me in a state of confusion.<sup>1</sup>

The entire weight of Penington's argument in the closing section of the pamphlet is thrown toward caution, sobriety and the careful sifting of religious experience. He attempted to outline the manner of true Christian seeking, in meekness and long-suffering while keeping close to scripture in thought and language. The plan offered is nothing less than that of the mystical way, the lone spiritual pilgrimage towards oneness. His closing exhortation sounds with renewed prophetic ardour that adds to accustomed Puritan eloquence the call to mystical passivity.

So let the glory of Man fall for ever. So let the Reason, Understanding and Wisdom of the Creature always prove a broken reed to run into it, pierce and wound it; that none may ever come to know or enjoy God, or any thing of God; but as he freely imparts himself, or of himself, unto them.<sup>2</sup>

The last pamphlet in this series, *An Eccho from the Great Deep: Containing Further Inward Openings* (assigned by Thomason to 24th November 1650) is an extension of its predecessor taking up many of the arguments necessary to distinguish between true and deluded mystical Christianity. Its main purpose was to settle finally a view of the principles and practices of "The Mad Folks" whose brokenness, Penington affirmed in his preface, paralleled his own. As a people whose shattered religion earned them only ridicule, the Ranters suffered doubly; but to Penington their sickness was "more lovely in my eye than that health which others enjoy and please themselves in."<sup>3</sup> Only from those who had been

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *Severall Fresh Inward Openings*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> I. Penington, *An Eccho from the Great Deep*, Sig. A2. [Wing. P1163].

reduced to complete spiritual destitution could the new birth emerge, yet Penington remained troubled by the excesses of Ranter behaviour; its pretentious casting aside of all tradition was less worrying than the wild immorality to which inspiration led. Penington made himself clear on this point.

My heart tells me that ye are not thus shattered, broken, and made so odious for nothing: yet let me withal tell you, that my spirit thinketh you never the neerer either for your principles or practises, which carry more unloveliness to me than any principles or practises of any sort of men upon the face of the earth.<sup>1</sup>

And he went on to show that he had distinguished the way of his own inner life from theirs:

And for such of you who break forth through Visions and Revelations into new apprehensions, I profess I know you not, this is not the way of the breaking forth of my life, which must not be steered by these, but be able to judg these, which when once I feel with cleerness, Majesty and power, I may then be drawn to beleve that I begin to taste life.<sup>2</sup>

His words do not amount to a total rejection. It was to clarify their vision and demonstrate how true light might be found that Penington wrote the exhortation. The preface arouses its readers to "Behold a Soul burnt up into perfect misery by the flames of its own love!" preparing us for an enraptured outpouring, a chastening spiritual reply to Ranter revelations.<sup>3</sup> But the pamphlet is remarkably restrained in tone. It consists of a series of twenty-four neatly constructed essays each probing a question of belief in which the Ranters had gone astray. It is fair to say that Penington was doing nothing less than pointing out the proven way of European mysticism and showing the compulsion to rediscover it as the necessary outgrowth of Puritanism. He believed that his scriptural learning, which helped temper the fantastic side of mysticism, would make his views more desirable than those of the self-exalted prophets. It was a clear case of pleasing man or pleasing God. We may doubt whether the Ranters appreciated much of the subtlety of Penington's thought. For the most part, their chaotic and irresponsible tracts stand apart from his, though both look to the inner light. Penington's are simply

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *An Eccho from the Great Deep*, Sig. A2v.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. A3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. A4v.

the more profound in their understanding of what inner transformation amounted to. Almost certainly he was misled in believing that wise pleading could sober the Ranters and persuade them to wait patiently for the dawning of a purer light, but effective or not he had to say what he did. His abandonment of direct political commentary for the less promising attempt to direct the confused steps of anti-nomians explains why his writing has not figured in recent studies of seventeenth-century revolutionary politics. For Penington politics had a transparency through which the deeper politics of men could be seen, and he took it as his task to picture them in the language of mysticism. Practical affairs were of little substance apart from what they showed about the heart's desire and its fidelity to the highest Puritan idealism. Altercations with the Ranters were valuable only as they showed how a right conception of God, to be found only in submission of the will, was linked with good politics. Penington's discussions seek this fundamental level where they associate rigorous Puritan spirituality with the events of the day. Almost always the balance tips in favour of eternity against time, so Penington's significance is to be judged finally in the sphere of religion. His purpose in *An Eccho from the Great Deep* was to disclose himself on general questions of mystical pursuit, and it is clear that this sort of undertaking was most congenial to him. Through this and other writings he effectively entered the English mystical tradition consolidating and enriching the best of European mysticism that had filtered into the mid-seventeenth-century separatist movement. This at least was the opinion of William Law, who read Penington with warm approval. The quality of Penington's mystical awareness is often of the highest as a passage from the essay "Of Love" shows.

Love is the spiritual affection between God and this new child. As they know one another, so they love one another: and as their knowledg is the straitest knowledg, so is their love likewise the closest love. There is no such union besides as is between them, nor are there any such streams of love any where else to carry hearts up and down to one another, or to center them in one another.<sup>1</sup>

He continues in this graphic, almost emblematic, manner:

The streams of this Love run (though sometimes insensibly) forward and backward from each towards each in the midst of

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *An Eccho from the Great Deep*, pp. 14-15.

all the varieties, changes, and strange unlovely disguises that both are clothed with. And O what torment is it to have this Love chained up! How doth it consume and burn up the poor spirit within, when it cannot find its God to go forth upon, for it cannot move towards any thing else!<sup>1</sup>

There is a gentle beauty about this longest and most unified of Penington's essays that contrasts with the angry vehemence and condemnations of his earlier pamphlets. Something of his Quaker manner appears as the essential Penington comes forward; what he really wanted to say was at last finding words as argument, tone and placing of emphasis work together to produce an essay worthy of the seventeenth-century familiar manner. The appeal of Cowley or Sir William Temple to the reader's personal responses is found here too. Penington's literary gift shows at its best when the mood is still and quiet with just the echoes of his troubled search in the background. The quality of his best passages calls for comparison with some of the century's most admired religious prose, that in Richard Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*. Baxter maintains exactness and clarity while being movingly personal; and the same can be claimed for Penington who could adjust his style to remain at a level of emotional urgency without running off into the obscurity which was so often a product of enthusiasm. It is the nakedness of heart, the suggestion of spiritual travail in which the pamphlet was written that invite comparison with the personal style of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, a book also close to being spiritual autobiography. Penington relied on the strong affective power of his own religious experience, which, like Baxter, he freely adapted for didactic purposes. The obvious dangers are avoided—extreme privacy, sectarian bias, and excessive importunity. Rather than dramatically exploit the strange windings of his religious pilgrimage, like the exhibitionistic Ranters Abiezer Coppe<sup>2</sup> and Laurence Clarkson,<sup>3</sup> Penington dwelt on the universal aspects of his experience. He wrote mainly about the demonstrable truths of wayfaring—rejection, reconciliation and love—and in doing so gave sharp definition to Puritan quietism.

Penington sought not just to convince his readers but

<sup>1</sup> I. Penington, *An Eccho from the Great Deep*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *alias* Higham (1619-72), *D.N.B.*

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Claxton *or* Clarkson (1615-67), *D.N.B.*

to move them. Polemic and exhortation are less central to the general effect of his writing than is the expression of personal striving. It is the sense of spiritual exposure in a hostile atmosphere, the repeated attempts to find a formulation that would ease despair and show a way to liberation that give Penington's pamphlets their lasting interest. The best passages—unfortunately seldom sustained—show him capable of using the language of Puritanism with a new depth and precision. In setting down with such personal emphasis his reasonings and struggles of spirit he brought vigour to an idiom that was beginning to lose its immediacy. His quickness of response to public events, and his eagerness to see their religious meaning, clearly called for a prose more flexible and idiomatic than that handed him by preachers such as Goodwin. Penington's language is biblical enlivened by the authentic tones of speech that crisis had turned into a new and more searching instrument. His imagery of fall and redemption, of light and darkness, seem exactly suited to the unprecedented situation in which he found himself. In short, Penington is an underestimated writer as well as being a figure of key importance in the quietist phase of Puritanism. The next figure of his stature was William Law, and he resembles him in combining shrewd social analysis with mystical insight in a prose of great force and beauty. The time must come when this is taken into account in discussions of seventeenth-century literary developments. But what concerns us is the kind of influence Penington brought to bear on Quakerism. Here again there has been some undervaluing of his importance.

By turning inward from the carnage of the civil war and entanglements of parliament, Penington virtually denied himself a place in the official annals of revolution (S. R. Gardiner mentions him only in passing), while in fact his writings are as important as those of the committed activists in forming a picture of the English mind during the Republican interlude. Without mention of excursions into quietism the general picture remains incomplete and the Quaker picture obscured. Penington was among the articulate few who effectively attacked churchmen resting on outward symbols and fine points of doctrine. Yet he as vigorously opposed those who were too zealously reformist, including we may suppose, members of his own sect. A weariness of

superficial dispute had set in which Penington met by turning attention to the hidden riches of mystical Christianity. True obedience was the inner harmony with God exemplified by Christ and his disciples, and Scripture was not to be read in the letter but in the Spirit. The set forms of worship that got between the heart and the Holy Spirit were to be put aside. Prayer was an opening of the heart, and brotherhood a sense of unobstructed oneness among all believers. These were some of the radical conclusions to which his objections led, an attempted restatement of primitive Christianity in all its prophetic ardour, the essential message of Quakerism. All this was in Penington's mind well before Quakerism became an issue and he had worked through it with great subtlety. The pamphlets of 1650 pointed to a religion of depth and incontrovertible simplicity. They spoke with an eloquence that no other commentator on the state of religious affairs managed, and looked at human nature with a realism uncommon in the century. But as the bitterness of revolution was absorbed into Restoration calm, Penington's early tracts ceased to speak his mind. He had moved beyond them into a fuller mystical life within the Society of Friends.

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