



Silvia Berti

At the roots of unbelief*

Atheism remains a difficult historical subject. Sources and proofs are few and multi interpretable, which has greatly influenced the character of the historiographic study of 'unbelief'. In this article, Silvia Berti discusses the creation of 'the atheist' and historiographic issues concerning the interpretation and study of the available sources.

'Cardan & Campanella font passer pour un precepte d'importance que pour bien traiter, ou presenter quelque sujet, il faut... y transmuër, s'il est possible, tout son esprit, & toute son imagination; d'où l'on voit souvent arriver, que ceux des Comediens qui sont le mieux pourvus de cette faculté imaginative jouent aussi toujours mieux leurs personnages. L'on dit en France, que Dubartas auparavant que de faire cette belle description du Cheval où il a si bien rencontré, s'enfermoit quelquefois dans une chambre, & se mettant à quatre pattes souffloit, hennissoit, gambadoit, tiroit des ruades, alloit l'amble, le trot, le galot, à courbette, & taschoit par toutes sortes de moyens à bien contrefaire le Cheval.'**

If it is true that the problem of proof and persuasion is inevitably inscribed within the scholarly, conceptual and narrative structure of every book of history, whether historians are conscious of this or not, it is also true that several studies of intellectual history bear the signs of their encounters with this thematic more prominently and inevitably than others. This problem is inscribed within the study of unbelief and atheism as within few other studies. A barren field, with poor harvests, the study of unbelief and atheism is a place where the proofs, often hard to find and almost never univocal, are usually hidden by dissimulation and concealment, and where persuasion easily dominates. In a rather interesting manner, however, this peculiar proof-persuasion relationship is intensified when we move on to consider the historiography on the subject. Perhaps in part to compensate for the

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** G. Naudé, *Considerations politiques sur les Coups d'Estat* (1679).

scarcity of explicit documentation, this historiography has often been written in a distinctly ideological manner. And if it is true that the history of a problem always ends up being a structural part of the problem itself, this is especially evident in the case in which secular ideology investigates its own origins (in a way perhaps second only to the debate on the French and Bolshevik revolutions). A brief and necessarily summary glance at the question will help to clarify my perspective.

Nineteenth century culture commonly connected the idea of unbelief to the following dominant themes: the renaissance appeal to classical antiquity, a critical use of philology operating at the same time as the birth of the modern notion of scholarship, and an enthusiastic commitment to the new science that attempted to break the boundaries of religious orthodoxy. We might detect, however, an interesting discrepancy in historiographical attitude towards the Reformation. For example, in France, Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant and later on Guizot generally emphasized the close connection between the Reformation and the origins of eighteenth-century freedom of thought for reasons that went far beyond their Protestant upbringing. The stress on this link, which was not without factual basis, was related to that generation's own liberalism. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Positivism seemed to effect a change. In writing its own history, secular ideology started gradually to think of itself as independent of the religious context from which it had emerged. What contributed largely to this process was, as seems quite obvious, the emphasis on the role of science, as well as the irrepressible tendency of philosophers - which, strangely enough, Positivism seems to have inherited acritically from Idealism - to believe that the history of thought can be viewed as a sequence of self-contained and self-defining philosophical systems, each endowed with autonomy of meaning. When la France 'toute laïque' of the Third Republic celebrated its definitive victory over the 'France toute catholique' which, centuries earlier, had crushed Bayle's spirit, it construed its intellectual identity in opposition to the confessionalistic, ultramontane front. A strong ideological bias was present on both sides; this need to protect and preserve one's intellectual tradition has often prevented the assimilation of critical analyses from the opposing side. When what is at stake is one's contribution to the triumph of the idea of progress, atheism and the advancement of civilization - or, conversely, one's contribution to the defense of authority, religion, and ecclesiastical institutions against the threatening circulation of free thought - it is not surprising that one should

not wish to risk undermining one's position.

At the beginning of this century, students of intellectual history such as Lanson and Busson¹ stressed the simultaneously erudite and sceptical character of libertinism, removing it from its links with Christian faith. This position was to be developed and enhanced in Paul Hazard's great book *La crise de la conscience européenne: 1685-1715* (Paris 1935) and culminated in René Pintard's classic study *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Paris 1943). Pintard particularly emphasized the value of libertine criticism of religious orthodoxy. But it must at least be noted that Pintard himself, after raising a monument to the cultural relevance of 'libertinage', commented on the effective intellectual stagnation of authors like Charron, Naudé or La Mothe Le Vayer, who turned their attention to the past and were weighed down by their own erudition.² On this point we should recall the perceptive remarks of Lucien Febvre who, reviewing Pintard's book in 1944, took a harsher stance toward libertinism.³ Where Pintard had voiced a 'doubt' and hinted vaguely at some self-criticism, Febvre spoke of 'ratage' and 'défaite',⁴ diminishing the force of the libertine arguments, and pointing out their subalternity vis-à-vis political absolutism. This criticism should naturally be read against the backdrop of his celebrated *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI siècle* (published only a year earlier, in 1943), in which he developed a thesis that was later widely accepted. Febvre argued that the word 'atheist', when used in the sixteenth century, had no real meaning, because the intellectual tools that were necessary for its conception were not yet available (a thesis which was later supported by a well-known essay by P.O. Kristeller).⁵ In this way, clearly, Febvre intended to warn historians against anachronism. There was, however, something

- 1 G. Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris 1894); 'Origines et premières manifestations de l'esprit philosophique dans la littérature française de 1675 à 1748', after in *Revue des Cours et conférences* (1907-10); 'Questions diverses sur l'histoire de l'esprit philosophique en France avant 1750', *RhIF* 19 (1912). Of Henri Busson cf. particularly *Les sources et le développement du rationalisme dans la littérature française de la Renaissance* (Paris 1922).
- 2 R. Pintard, *Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Paris 1943) 566-69.
- 3 L. Febvre, 'Aux origines de l'esprit moderne: libéralisme, naturalisme, mécanisme', *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* VI (1944), reprinted in *Au cœur religieux du XVIe siècle* (Paris 1957) 337-58.
- 4 Ibidem, p. 348.
- 5 P.O. Kristeller, 'The Myth of Renaissance Atheism and the French Tradition of Free Thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968) 233-43.

else. Although he was a conscious heir to the secularism of the Third Republic,⁶ Febvre refused to look to the past, and in this case to the libertine tradition, for the antecedents of certain tendencies of thought and politics which were made manifest only in the present. Modern atheism is quite unlike Rabelais' desecrating laughter; secularism cannot be founded on texts by authors who had always demonstrated formal obedience to the political and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Richard Popkin took part in the debate on French libertinism along similar lines by suggesting that La Mothe Le Vayer's Christian scepticism was sincere, (i.e. he sincerely felt that he was both a Christian and a sceptic) and by questioning Pintard's belief that the libertines meant to undermine Christianity.⁷

Peter Gay's most famous work on the Enlightenment (the first volume of which is significantly entitled *The Rise of Modern Paganism*),⁸ still profoundly marked by Aby Warburg's school of thought, placed the Enlightenment in the wake of Renaissance Humanism. As he was to stress once again in the preface to a later anthology: 'Classicism plus science is perhaps an overly brief but far from misleading definition of the Enlightenment mind'.⁹ It is precisely his emphasis on 'the appeal to antiquity' - in his perspective the distinctive trait of the Enlightenment attitude - that leads him, in my view, to overlook two centuries of religious struggles, thus underestimating the complexity of the ways in which the link between religion and politics structured the Enlightenment mind.

Among the many contributions to the debate on atheism that have recently appeared, two important opposing arguments stand out in particular. David Wootton challenged Febvre's views in his rich and illuminating essay *Lucien Febvre and the Problem of Unbelief in the Early Modern Period*¹⁰ and he strengthened this challenge with another piece on atheism published in 1992.¹¹ Alan Kors presents a different view in the first volume of his work *Atheism in France 1650-1729* (Princeton 1990). The very title of this

6 On this point see N. Zemon Davis, 'Rabelais Among the Censors (1540s, 1540s)', *Representations* 32 (1990) 9.

7 R.H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1979).

8 I am of course referring to Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York, Knopf 1966).

9 Peter Gay ed., *The Enlightenment. A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York 1973) 31.

10 *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988) 695-730.

11 D. Wootton, 'New Histories of Atheism' in: M. Hunter and D. Wootton ed., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford 1992) 13-53.

vastly learned volume, *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, reveals a great deal about the author's position on the subject. Kors argues that atheism is hardly autonomous; it is simply a child of orthodoxy. The attacks on the existence of God were generated, Kors states, from within the precincts of orthodoxy, as a result of the controversies that arose among different Christian schools of thought, mainly the Aristotelians, the Cartesians and the Malebranchists. Driven by the urge to overcome the arguments of their opponents, the theologians as a last resort attempted to charge them with atheism; thus the atheist first came into being as a rhetorical figure, created by the theological conflict itself. The stage was set for the creature to rebel against its creators, as in the legend of the Golem; the atheist took on a life of his own and started to use the arguments of the theologians against Christian faith, thus becoming a real unbeliever.

Wootton's response to these arguments is multi-faceted, and generally convincing. Wootton's criticism, that Kors relies surprisingly only on French sources, cannot help but be accepted, and further supported: if Kors had considered taking into account religious and profane English radicalism, or the heterodoxy and Spinozism present in the Dutch Republic, it is likely that the conceptual and chronological framework of the book would have changed considerably. Wootton also points out that Kors is only concerned with philosophical atheism - that is, philosophical arguments against the existence of God - and that he thereby deliberately disregards two hundred years in which unbelief was widely expressed. If Kors' argument were sound, Wootton seems to ask, where would we place Charron, Hobbes, and Sarpi, to name only a few? And what about minor characters who paid for their commitment to unbelief with their lives - men like Geoffroy Vallée, who was executed for denying God in 1574; Giulio Cesare Vanini, who shared the same fate and was burnt at the stake in Toulouse in 1619; or Thomas Aikenhead who was hanged in 1696? These are all pertinent observations, but if we were to follow Wootton's line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, we would be bound to decide that irreverence and blasphemous writings should be ranked with systematic statements of unbelief and atheism. At this point it may be helpful - even if it involves a rather technical discussion - to see how Wootton deals with authors like Charron, Naudé or Sarpi, who seem to convey an ambiguous message. In examining Charron, for example, Wootton claims that 'reading between the lines' is the only way to interpret texts that are structured around ambiguity (he thus implicitly refutes Popkin's interpretation of these writers, which is summed up in the expression

'sceptical fideism' - an expression that seems to me to be particularly apt, because it gives voice both to scepticism and faith). Aware of how unconventional some of the arguments of *De le sagesse* are, Wootton maintains that the more 'pious' ones are not to be taken at face value. Instead, they should be seen as devices contrived to conceal the authors' real thoughts; in actual fact, few were eager to face persecution, exile, or death.

I would like to clarify my own position and explain in what ways I disagree with Wootton's approach to the question. There is no doubt that secrecy and caution, and Nicodemite practices, were *de rigueur* during the age of the Inquisition,¹² and that the method of 'reading between the lines' can always be used in some way to analyze situations in which there is no freedom of expression.¹³ However, this basic notion does not authorize us to read a century of the history of ideas through what the authors *leave unsaid* or only say half of the time. Nor perhaps should it be forgotten that we owe the formulation of this principle to Leo Strauss,¹⁴ the staunchest critic of the subjective natural rights of the moderns, and therefore of modern liberalism and individualism. It is also interesting to note that, although he claims not to be a Straussian, Wootton does not manage to avoid using Straussian criteria, for example, when he asserts that 'a text in which conventional sentiments seem to be at odds with unconventional ones' would warrant 'an unshakeable 'reading between the lines.'¹⁵ Scholars as competent as Wootton are in no danger of going astray, but it is a dangerous method just the same, for several different reasons. First of all, it is dangerous because it reinvigorates that hermeneutic mentality that, more than twenty years ago, Quentin Skinner stigmatized as a 'mythology of coherence',¹⁶ constructed completely *a posteriori* by the historian. Secondly, it is dangerous because the historian will use only those pieces of 'evidence' capable of satisfying a reading which was formed *previous to* and *independently of* an examina-

12 For Nicodemism cf. A. Rotondò, 'Atteggiamenti della vita morale italiana del Cinquecento: la pratica nicodemitica', *Rivista storica italiana* 79 (1967) 991-1030; C. Ginzburg, *Il nicodemismo. Simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell'Europa del '500* (Torino 1970); C.M.N. Eire, 'Calvinism and Nicodemism: A Reappraisal', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 10 (1979) 45-69.

13 For an astute and very well documented use of this category, I refer again to N. Zemon Davis, 'Rabelais Among the Censors' cit., *passim*.

14 L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe 1952) 24.

15 p. 36. For Strauss' analogous argument, cf. *Persecution* cit., 32.

16 Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8 (1969) 16. See also 21-22.

tion of all the evidence at his disposal. As we can see, the problem of *proof* is always at the heart of interpretation. In fact, the more importance we attach to a broad concept of historical *possibility*, the more we must value a strict notion of *proof*.¹⁷ Otherwise, the ever-present risk is that of falling into the trap of either invention or wishful thinking.

It is clear that profoundly ambiguous thinkers like Charron or Naudé present a real challenge to the historian of ideas; I do not, however, think the problem can be solved by eliminating ambiguity, thereby suppressing one of the two sides of the conflict. This is, for example, precisely what happened to Hobbes, as John Pocock has pointed out in his thought-provoking essay *Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes*: 'Since Hobbes was a major philosopher, and books III and IV of *Leviathan* are manifestly not philosophy, it has seemed simplest to leave them out...' ¹⁸ If this position seemed too extreme, an alternative was to claim that, given that the last two books focused on prophecy and biblical criticism, they were almost totally irrelevant to the understanding of Hobbes' thought. After all, in Pocock's ironic words, 'Hobbes didn't really mean them'. It is certainly not easy for an age like ours, which has automatically inherited a kind of univocally oriented rationalism, to come to terms with and fully gauge the inherently contradictory quality of baroque thought. Dissimulation is, in my view, not merely a kind of varnish meant to conceal more subversive thoughts; it is not uncommon - nor should it seem an insult to logic - to come across sincere believers who also propose arguments which class the Christian religion with religious creeds of different times and places. At this point Febvre's warning against anachronism still seems particularly meaningful, in the sense that it is necessary to regard not only a part of the contradiction, but the entire thing, as historically real; otherwise, to offer an example at random, how would Charron's religious relativism prove different from Voltaire's? Moreover, what have we to do with a text? On what grounds are we entitled to decide whether an author could or could not have thought precisely in the terms in which he *did* think? In addition, isn't it clear that if we choose to interpret only a part of the material in our possession, (as well as implicitly authorizing anyone who might think dif-

17 On this point see Ginzburg's relevant observations in 'Prove e possibilità. In margine a *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre* di Natalie Zemon Davis', 'Postfazione' a *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre* (Torino 1979) 132-54.

18 See it reprinted in J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language & Time. Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York 1971) 148-201 (especially 160-61).

ferently than we do to behave in the same manner with the texts that we have left out), we do so in accordance with a teleological vision of history? Why does one never find (and the very few exceptions prove the rule) a manuscript *corpus* which can contradict the careful image deliberately presented by printed works?

It might be clear by now that, in my view, the intellectual strength and the subversive character of 'libertinage érudit' have been grossly overestimated. It is difficult to believe that modern free thought could have originated in the *débauches pyrrhoniennes* of Patin, Gassendi and Naudé,¹⁹ in the reflections of that same Naudé who glorified 'la Saint-Barthélemy', 'action tres-juste, et très remarquable',²⁰ and opposed political change and the 'impudente et trop audacieuse liberté des Libelles'.²¹ In the powerful words of Febvre: 'Allons à la messe'.²² Needless to say, Charron and Naudé the unbelievers exist, but they were created, about a century later, in several Enlightenment works, for example in the pages of a key text of the radical Enlightenment, the *Traité des trois imposteurs* (or *Esprit de Spinoza*),²³ a Spinozist treatise published in The Hague in 1719 by Charles Levier, a Huguenot publisher who emigrated to Holland, and later immersed himself in the works of the Dutch philosopher. To this text, basically structured along Spinozan-Hobbesian lines, the publishers added several sections of Charron and Naudé's works, carefully selected in order to stress only the subversive quality of their contents, the orthodox parts being left out.²⁴ In this way, they identified the irreligious tradition they stemmed from and also shaped their antichristian consciousness. This editorial choice, in addition to explaining the way in which Charron was used, may also help us understand how Spinoza's irruption on the historical scene represents, in my opinion, a real conceptual break with traditional modes of unbelief, through a reading that

19 J.-H. Reveillé-Parise ed., *Lettres de Gui Patin* (Paris 1846) III letter 508.

20 G. Naudé, *Considerations politiques sur les coups d'état* (1679) 180. See the long, famous description of 'la Saint-Barthélemy' (176-91).

21 G. Naudé, *Le Marfore ou Discours contre les Libelles*, A Paris (1620) 8.

22 L. Febvre, *Au coeur religieux* cit., 348.

23 On this text see S. Berti, 'The First Edition of the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, and its Debt to Spinoza's *Ethics*' in: M. Hunter and D. Wootton ed., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* cit., 183-220 and the French-Italian critical edition S. Berti ed., *Trattato dei tre impostori. La vita e lo spirito del Signor Benedetto de Spinoza* (Torino 1994).

24 For a more detailed analysis of the editorial selection of texts, cf. S. Berti, 'Scepticism and the *Traité des trois imposteurs*' in: R.H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt ed., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, New York, Kobenhaven, Koln 1993) 226-29.

gave the Spinozism of the early Enlightenment markedly antichristian and anti-absolutist overtones.

In the pages of the *Esprit de Spinoza* an anthropological notion of the origin of religions, based on Spinoza's doctrine of imagination (*Ethica*, I, Appendix) and biblical criticism (*TTP*), allowed for a new and more radical use of the libertine tradition, which functioned as though it had been freed from its fate of ambivalence. We are confronting a text which openly demands not only some level of unbelief towards the great historical religions, but the radical negation of the very idea of religion and creation. It will attempt to effect this negation, with a great deal of ingenuity, through a materialistic distortion of Spinoza's concept of substance. It is clear, however, that a page has been turned. Religious imposture is here also self-deception, a ruse of the priesthood, an abuse of power of the legislators and politicians who make use of it in order to subjugate the people. We are clearly a long way from the culture of dissimulation,²⁵ the cornerstone of a great many seventeenth-century ethical and political manoeuvres, in whose baroque coils one denied in order to assert, concealed in order to reveal, and planted the most dangerous seeds of free thought by declaring the most perfect Catholic orthodoxy. A distinctly libertine feature of the text is nonetheless revealed in its construction, which relies on a proven technique that provides for a subtle play of interlocking citations. Without excessive regard for scholarly practice; with a final, unavoidable bow to caution and to the necessity of not revealing such dangerous sources. But the merely naturalistic criticism of miracles was already in the past, a criticism dear to the 'libertinage érudit', which, comparing the origins of different religions, end up leading to a static, and ultimately, rather inert, religious indifferentism, often accompanied by historical-theoretical justifications of absolutism. Certainly the presence of libertine authors in the text is quite conspicuous, but these authors are here deprived of their inherent ambiguity.

Posing the question more generally, it seems to me that in terms of the conceptual break which I mentioned earlier, the dividing line should be placed not so much, as is commonly thought, between piety and impiety (in that reading 'impiety' includes all forms of unbelief, from irreverence to atheism), as between mere unbelief and atheism. The world of unbelief and blasphemy lives on within the world of faith. He who asserts, however courageously, that he does not believe in God, in the end does nothing

25 For a new evaluation of this concept in 17th century Europe see R. Villari, *Elogio della dissimulazione* (Bari, 1987); also P. Zagorin, *Ways of Lying. Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard 1990).

more than say: 'I believe that God does not exist.' Moreover, the recent, important studies which document other episodes of unbelief do not significantly change the basic question. To unhinge the world of faith, a solid philosophical foundation of atheism combined with a new method of biblical exegesis was necessary. This breakthrough is represented by Spinoza, the only philosopher who provided the philosophical tools that made the existence of God as creator impossible; philosophical atheism was thus achieved, and was rendered all the more disruptive by the biblical criticism through which he undermined the authority of the sacred texts. This was not, in fact, a mere theoretical acquisition: it delegitimized the presumed sacredness of the foundations of civil and ecclesiastic authority.

I am not trying to claim that the radicals were pure 'philosophical atheists' whose aim was solely that of denying God. In fact the Spinozan intellectual experience was assimilated by the early Enlightenment free-thinkers in light of the rigourist religious tradition they inherited, (this tradition was generally Augustinian, both in its Protestant and Catholic incarnations), and this led them to stress the original, pure, non dogmatic aspect of their religiosity. What I have just said naturally applies to the generation closer to Spinoza's - Peter Balling, for instance, who was both a Spinozist and a Collegiant, and Adriaen Koerbagh, both a Spinozist and a Socinian, who died in jail for not renouncing his beliefs,²⁶ but also applies to the generations that followed. Benjamin Furly's *coterie*²⁷ best represents the converging of Heterodoxy and Spinozism.

In the following generation, that of the *crise de la conscience européenne*, the understanding of the link between religious criticism and radical political consciousness grew stronger. Moreover, it was that generation's examination of the evangelical message's inspiring moral principles, coupled with their growing indignation at the Roman Church's and the monarchic power's persecution of the Huguenots and Jansenists, which constituted a determining cause of the subversive and antichristian character of their cultural experience (and these factors were at least as disruptive as the impact caused by philosophical atheism).²⁸ I have just made mention of anti-

26 On Collegiants cf. L. Kolakowski's invaluable book *Crétiens sans Eglise* (Paris 1969) and A. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason* (Princeton 1991).

27 On Furly see W.I. Hull, *Benjamin Furly and Quakerism in Rotterdam* (Swarthmore 1941).

28 Although this is not the place for a more thorough discussion of these intellectual attitudes, it should now be clear in what ways my position differs from Margaret Jacob's in *The Radical Enlightenment* (London 1981). Just to give an example, it is in my view obvious that the members of a clandestine society like the 'Chevaliers de la Jubilation'

Christian attitudes. When I say anti-christian I am referring to the attack on the ecclesiastical establishment and the corruption of the priesthood - which the Italian freethinker Alberto Radicati di Passerano had ironically named 'profession sacerdotale' - that, in theological terms, was accompanied by the denial of the Trinity and of the divine nature of Christ. This position often implied - however paradoxical it may seem, and once again echoing Spinozan and Socinian themes - a praise of primitive Christianity and of Christ, the wise legislator in his moral perfection. Needless to say, it is important not to neglect the political commitment of early Enlightenment intellectuals which, as Robbins, Venturi and Pocock have shown, found its expression in the English context in the creation of neo-republicanism. If we consider France, the example of the Count of Boulainvilliers is particularly striking.²⁹ Scholars have stressed the startling discrepancy between his two main intellectual concerns, Spinozism, on the one hand, and his staunch support of the 'thèse nobiliaire' on the other.³⁰ The connection between his unusual commitment to Spinozism, which he makes clear both in his translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the *Essai de Métaphysique* (1712), and in his *Extraits de lecture* from the *Tractatus*, and his aristocratic defense of the privileges of the nobility, which, generally regarded as conservative, is expressed in his *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de la France* and his *Essai sur la noblesse*, may in fact be best accounted for by the anti-absolutist substance of both. Boulainvilliers was actually searching for a political model that could serve as a substitute for absolutist apologetics

did not join the Walloon community merely for the sake of attaining social identity, or out of personal convenience (as Jacob claims). On the contrary, joining the community provided them with a starting point for merging their Spinozism with the creed of the Radical Whigs, which had been exported to the continent. This might help us better to understand why the 'Chevaliers de la Jubilation' always felt bound to defend the protestant cause in terms of international politics. In other words, Jacob's rigid separation of pantheism and republicanism, on one side, and Newtonianism, religiosity and monarchist ideology, on the other, provides an interpretation that is excessively anglocentered and ultimately does little justice to the political and intellectual differences present in the continent. What seems particularly difficult to support is Jacob's equation of Pantheism and a democratic approach to politics. (For further remarks see my review of *The Radical Enlightenment*, *Rivista storica italiana* 96 (1984) 248-53.

29 On Boulainvilliers, in addition to R. Simon's classic study *Henry de Boulainviller* (Paris s.d.) see at least H.A. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy. Aristocratic Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1988).

30 For a different view see F. Furet, 'Two Historical Legitimizations of Eighteenth-Century French Society: Mably and Boulainvilliers', *In the Workshop of History* (Chicago 1982) 124-39 (especially 130).

and monarchist ideology.

What the Naudé quotation, appended to this paper's first page, means to me, in this context, is probably clear, but I would like to make it even more explicit: imagination and strict, almost obsessive adherence to the object should always go hand in hand. As Isaiah Berlin wrote in a passage which one of my fellow-readers marked with two pencil marks in Firestone Library's copy of *Concepts and Categories*:

‘If we ask ourselves which historians have commanded the most lasting admiration, we shall, I think, find that they are neither the most ingenious, nor the most precise, nor even the discoverers of new facts or unsuspected causal connections, but those who (like imaginative writers) present men or societies or situations in many dimensions, at many intersecting levels simultaneously, writers in whose accounts human lives, and their relations both to each other and to the external world, are *what (at our most lucid and imaginative) we know that they can be.*’³¹

We can only truly assume this relationship to the past, however, by means of sources. This banality is today often considered clumsy positivistic unconsciousness - although the real positivist is the one who hastily identifies facts and documents - by those who are intent on reducing history to rhetoric.³² When there are no more *realities* to understand, but only *representations*, every historical approach becomes equal, and functions as self-justification, since verification has been eliminated. Above all, this extreme subjectivization of the historian's work,³³ this excessive concentration on who is writing, distances us from the past, and therefore renders our work, purely and simply, *useless*. Mere testimony of ourselves, which others, more serious than we, will use in the future as a source. Perhaps the course could be reversed, if we listen less to ourselves and more to the waves of the past mysteriously coming toward us. If we sift through its traces with love and respect. If we

31 Isaiah Berlin ‘The Concept of Scientific History’, in his *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London 1978) 141. My emphasis.

32 On this point cf. the cogent remarks by A. Momigliano in ‘The Rhetoric of History and the History of Rhetoric: on Hayden White's Tropes’, *Settimo contributo alla storia degli studi classici nel mondo antico* (Roma 1984) 49-59.

33 On this point see Ginzburg's perceptive discussion of Hayden White as deeply influenced by Italian philosophical neoidealism in ‘Just One Witness,’ S. Friedlander ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Harvard 1992) 82-96 (especially 87-92).

make ourselves capable of being ‘forgers’ before being ‘critics.’³⁴ To succeed, like the good Dubartas, to ‘bien contrefaire le cheval’.

34 The allusion is, of course, to Anthony Grafton’s *Forgers and Critics* (Princeton 1990).