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Jarring Witnesses in the Poetry of John Hewitt and Derek Mahon

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> We ask for history, and that means that we ask for the simple record of unadulterated facts; we look, and nowhere do we find the object of our search, but in its stead we see the divergent accounts of a host of jarring witnesses, a chaos of disjoined and discrepant narrations, and yet, while all of these can by no possibility be received as true, at the same time not one of them can be rejected as false[1].

The above quotation from F.H. Bradley concerns the problem of multiple points of view in the field of narrative historiography and is the centrepiece to Robert Holton's study of the dynamics of point of view in modern fiction. Holton deftly charts critical attitudes to historiography, from Aristotle through Foucault. The problem of point of view throughout historiography is highlighted, particularly with recourse to the opinions of Bradley, through Louis Mink and Hayden White. With these attitudes in mind, and through the theoretical lens of Mikhail Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu, Horton highlights the strategies used to deal with multiple points of view in examples of modern and postmodern historical novels. Holton highlights 'a specifically modern pressure on the certainty of narrative perspective in historiography' and concludes that 'the struggle with jarring witnesses … is one of the definitive characteristics of modernist fiction'[2]. Holton does not however explore the extent to which that struggle is characteristic of modern poetry. After a brief illustration of exactly what is meant by 'jarring witnesses', this essay will examine the extent to which the struggle with them Holton identifies is characteristic of the poetry of John Hewitt and Derek Mahon.

Bradley mentions jarring witnesses only briefly in his *Presuppositions of Critical History*. In this context, they are a metaphor for the disparate, multiple points of view which are problematic for the writing of episodic narrative history. Thus, writing a history of multiethnic, multilinguistic Malaysia would

[1] F.H. Bradley, *Collected Essays* (Oxford, 1935), 9.

[2] Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History* (Hemel Hempstead, 1994), 251.

presumably be bedevilled by the multiple points of view, the jarring witnesses, of the various ethnic groups and their various religious and cultural beliefs, not to mention those of Malaysia's imperial colonisers. For Bradley, the historian's task is to arbitrate between jarring witnesses to 'bring order to chaos'[3] of multiple points of view. Holton points out the corrective and exclusionary bent to Bradley's viewpoint and indeed Bradley's essay is at pains to point out the validity and invalidity of certain narratives. For Bradley, there is an implicit hierarchy of narratives for historiographical consideration: some witnesses can be relied upon, some jar and so cannot. So, while jarring witnesses begin life for Bradley as a multitude of equally salient narratives, they end up as narratives earmarked for exclusion from history. Robert Holton prefers to keep with Bradley's original metaphor for jarring witnesses, equally salient multiple points of view, but recognises that valid points of view have been and continue to be suppressed. Thus, when Holton refers to jarring witnesses, he refers to the narratives of the excluded and suppressed, rather than to those *to be* excluded and suppressed for the good and cohesion of the meta-narrative, for example

> Jarring voices were emanating from diverse sectors of society as the tide of imperialist expansion had begun to turn; the dissatisfaction of women was propelling an increasingly militant women's movement; and the working classes were demanding more power … [4]

Where Bradley sees jarring witnesses as something to be correct*ed* by exclusion from a narrative hierarchy, Holton, it can be argued, sees them as something potentially correct*ive* to narrative by their very inclusion in that narrative. It is with Holton's, rather than Bradley's, view of jarring witnesses that this essay examines the poetry of John Hewitt and Derek Mahon.

John Hewitt's 'The Colony' is an extended meditation on the development of a Roman colony, from the perspective of one of the Roman colonisers. 'First came the legions, then the colonists,' the persona begins. Eleven subsequent stanzas chart the 'smoking out the nests / of the barbarian tribesmen' and the subjugation of the colonised by the coloniser[5]. The poem ends at an uneasy present with the decline of the Roman Empire. The persona recognises that 'from other lands the legions ebb' and ruminates on the coming future

[3] Ibid., 9.

[4] Ibid., 94.

[5] John Hewitt 'The Colony' in Michael Longley and Frank Ormsby (eds), *John Hewitt: Selected Poems* (Belfast, 2007), 36.

'when the tribes assert / their ancient right and take what once was theirs'[6]. The poem works as a metaphor for the historical Protestant experience in the lands which became Northern Ireland. In a sense the very fact of the poem represents proof that Holton's assertion that 'the struggle with jarring witnesses … is one of the definitive characteristics of modernist fiction' is also true of modernist poetry; this poem sets out ostensibly to highlight a narrative of historical subjugation and disempowerment. Further, though the single persona structure of the poem does not allow for the self-expression of the natives (the jarring witnesses in question), the persona is at pains to empathise with their historical plight. When ruminating on a massacre of colonists, he recognises that his people's contemporary 'fear [is] quickened by the memory of guilt / for we began the plunder' and the tonality of his acknowledgement that 'We took their temples from them' and their 'kindlier soils' is far from triumphalist[7] [8]. However, while seemingly edging towards the remorseful, it becomes apparent in the ninth stanza that the persona is no altruist. Here the persona is concerned with a temporal present, where before he has been concerned, albeit with contrition, with an imagined historical past. While he may view the past between the coloniser and colonised objectively and intellectually, his views of the present crackle with bigotry:

> They worship Heaven strangely, having rites
> we snigger at, are known as superstitious,
> cunning by nature, never to be trusted,
> given to dancing and a kind of song
> seductive to the ear, a whining sorrow.
> Also they breed like flies. The danger's there;
> when Caesar's old and lays his sceptre down,
> we'll be a little people, well outnumbered[9].

The persona is conflicted by an intellectual desire that historical injustice be righted and a gut emotional reaction to the perceived threat posed to his people by the very righting of that injustice. However, while this represents the limit to the persona's ability to countenance the jarring witnesses of the

[6] Ibid., 39.

[7] Although running the risk of gendering the poems in this essay, for the sake of tidiness, personae will be referred to in the masculine where not obviously defined, rather than "he/she, his/her" etc. The reader will also be referred to in the masculine.

[8] JHewitt, 'The Colony', 37.

[9] Ibid., 39.

natives, it is not the only struggle with jarring witnesses depicted in the poem. An emotional connection to the land comes to predominate at the poem's close and, accordingly, the language used to describe the landscape alters in the fifth stanza. Where previously such descriptions had been peripheral glances at 'heaving country' and 'shining corn', in the fifth stanza the land is

> this patient, temperate, slow, indifferent,
> crop-yielding, crop-denying, in-neglect-
> quickly-returning-to-the-nettle-and-bracken,
> sodden and friendly land[10].

With this semantic field of emotional and physical intimacy, this is the first time in the poem where the persona betrays emotional attachment to the land. Later, in the tenth stanza, as the Empire recedes, the persona points out the people who 'ignore the question [of what will happen to them] / sure that Caesar's word / is Caesar's bond for legions in our need'[11] . The very mention of the people being 'sure' seems almost to emphasise their lack of certitude. There is the strong implication, with the descendants of the colonisers becoming emotionally attached to the land, the colonisers have in a sense become naturalised and are no longer colonisers but natives in their own right, albeit different to the 'native' natives. John Wilson Foster states that 'Hewitt's Roman is today's Protestant–arrogant, patronizing, frightened, forced by his restricted definition of accepted behaviour to find the Catholic Irish savage, yet perversely sure that he too is Irish.'[12] The oft-cited end of the poem sees the persona admitting as much. He is intellectually able to admit that his people's colonial history has 'altered us' but, in a dichotomous fashion similar to his inability to countenance the jarring witnesses of the natives beyond rectifying an imaginative past, there is a defensive, emotional and intransigent streak to his final three statements:

> we would be strangers in the Capitol;
> this is our country also, nowhere else;
> and we shall not be outcast on the world[13].

[10] Ibid., 36–7.
[11] Ibid., 39.
[12] John Wilson Foster, 'The Landscape of the Planter and the Gael in the Poetry of John Hewitt and John Montague', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 1 (1975), 17–33.
[13] Hewitt, 'The Colony'), 40.

The colonisers' transformation to coloniser-natives is complete: they are 'strangers' to their Roman heritage and, in being 'outcast', they are now jarring witnesses to Roman interests.

Richard Kirkland levels the accusation that 'Hewitt's writings appear as nothing less than wagers with heterogeneity: if his analytic method cannot prevail, sensory impression and prejudicial emotion will inevitably break through. Moreover, there is evidence that Hewitt was aware of this dilemma.'[14] This seems a rather odd thing to level, negatively, as if Hewitt was seeking to avoid the issue, when the issue seems to be exactly what Hewitt is addressing in one of his most famous poems. Hewitt's coloniser is at pains to objectively analyse the history of his own people and he arguably manages to atone, if only in accepting a narrative of collective guilt, for past injustices. However, he is unable even to think of the colonised, who cohabit his temporal present, outwith the dehumanising language of subjugation. It is arguable that, rather than the Roman/Northern Irish metaphor, it is this struggle between cultural atonement and cultural survival which is central to 'The Colony'. This struggle is a perfect example of how the 'struggle with jarring witnesses'[15] , that Holton perceives in modernist fiction, can be said to be true of modern poetry from Northern Ireland. Further, 'The Colony' highlights, through the Romans' transformation from colonisers to coloniser-natives, the historical creation and recreation of jarring witnesses which struggle amongst themselves.

Also alluding to antiquity is Derek Mahon's poem 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy'. The poem takes its refrain 'It is night and the barbarians have not come'[16] from the Egyptian-Greek poet C. P. Cavafy. The original poem, translated by Keeley and Sherrard as 'Waiting for the Barbarians'[17] , concerns an ancient town under perceived threat from external barbarians. The leaders of the town wait to surrender to the barbarians, dress up in elaborate state regalia for the transfer of power and cease to legislate for the town's inhabitants. The barbarians do not come and word is spread that in fact there are no barbarians. Rather than being a case for celebration, the townspeople desert the streets in

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[14] Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (New York, 1996), 31.

[15] Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History* (Hemel Hempstead, 1994), 251.

[16] Derek Mahon, 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy' in Paul Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London, 1986), 289.

[17] C.P. Cavafy 'Waiting for the Barbarians' in George Savidis (ed.), Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (trans.), *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (Princeton, 1992), 18.

consternation. It is at this point that Mahon sets his poem. In the light of the barbarians not having come, the narrator harks back to a time when

> It was not always so hard;
> When the great court flared
> With gallowglasses and language difficulty … [18]

The paradox of finding 'gallowglasses and language difficulty' easier than not being invaded by barbarians is a strange thing to comprehend and it is tempting to accept Norman Vance's succinct summation of what Mahon is getting at:

> Once there had been the straightforward polarity of Planter and Gael, colonizer and colonized, and a clear sense of language difference and of who the "barbarians" were. But the simple sixteenth-century world of conquest and difference … has gone[19]

However, Vance's reading fails to take fully into account the complexity of imagery Mahon uses here and, it can be argued, crucially misses Mahon's point. Gallowglasses were Norse-Scottish-Irish mercenaries. The image is intriguing as, apart from being an interesting historical hybrid of the Irish and two of their main medieval invaders, the gallowglasses themselves were of dubious loyalty and could be found on all sides of any tussle in the medieval British Isles. There is no 'straightforward polarity' in the section. In fact, the narrator fondly remembers a time when there was much difficulty in communication and difficulty in discerning who was loyal to whom. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the poem jumps into a decidedly modern present:

> Now it is night and the barbarians have not come.
> Or if they have we only recognise,
> Harsh as a bombed bathroom,
> The frantic anthropologisms
> And lazarus ironies behind their talk

[18] Derek Mahon, 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy' in Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 289.

[19] Norman Vance 'From Decadence to Byzantium', *New Literary History*, 35.4 Forms of Decadence (2004), 563–72.

Of fitted carpets, central heating
And automatic gear-change–
Like the bleached bones of a hare
Or a handful of spent
Cartridges on a deserted rifle range[20].

Again, the imagery is complex but Mahon's point is worth digging out. Mahon's persona harks back fondly to a time of medieval confusion and hybridity which, he imagines, was not as hard to live with as the modern world's static hegemony of mutually intelligible languages of materialism (the carpets, central heating and cars) and violence (the bombed bathrooms and bullet cartridges). This turns traditional republican narrative, of a peaceful, cohesive Ireland made confused and problematic by British invaders, fundamentally on its head.

'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy' struggles with jarring witnesses in a rather different way than Hewitt's 'The Colony'. Where that poem's persona actively tells the story of the subjugated, the persona here undermines elements of the narrative of the subjugated. It could be argued, from the point of view of the jarring witness (that is to say, a republican narrative of Irish history) that in so undermining republican narrative, Mahon is complicit in maintaining the illegitimacy of the ascendancy. However, Mahon's persona specifically points out his disdain for what he sees as a mutually intelligible (i.e. to republicans and everyone else) present of vacuous materialism and violence, and his preference for what *he* understands the past to have been like. In a sense then, the jarring witness that Mahon's poem struggles to give voice to is Mahon's perception of Irish medieval history which has been submerged or distorted by other jarring witnesses.

Where Mahon portrays materialism and violence side by side in 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', he arguably could be said to equate one with the other. This would almost certainly seem an unfair equation; a life of docile materialism is surely preferable to a life of violence and anguish. But the reader is unmistakably left with the sense that materialism and violence are related, if not necessarily antithetical to each other. This fundamental intertwining of materialism and violence crops up time and again in modern Northern Irish poetry and it is to a powerful example of such a poem that this essay now turns. John Hewitt's 'The Coasters' is entirely in the second person.

[20] Mahon, 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', 289–90.

The reader therefore reads in the guise of a 'coaster', namely an inhabitant of North Down's 'gold coast' middle-class Belfast suburbs[21] . 'You coasted along' reads the first line and ends the seventeenth line, neatly bracketing three stanzas of detached middle class materialist living; 'larger houses, gadgets, more machines / … golf and weekend bungalows', holidays to caravan parks and the Mediterranean, infrequent church attendance and 'subscriptions to worthwhile causes'[22] 'The other sort, / coasting too' appear in the third stanza[23]. Because 'relations were improving', 'You visited each other … / moved by your broadmindedness' and 'The annual processions / began to look rather like folk festivals'[24] . The final four stanzas chart the simmering of intercommunal tensions in the language of epidemic infection, 'the old lies festered; / the ignorant became more thoroughly infected' , while statements that the addressee simply 'coasted along' now intersperse rather than bracket the stanzas[25]. The implication is that *by* coasting along, imagining themselves uninvolved in civil strife while always voting in 'the regular plebiscites of loyalty' and reaping the material benefits of them, that the coasters themselves fuel the epidemic: 'You coasted along / and the sores suppurated and spread'[26] . By the last stanza, similarly to his 'The Colony', Hewitt moves from past tense to present tense and the sense of urgency and of complicity is palpable:

> Now the fever is high and raging;
> who would have guessed it, coasting along?
> The ignorant-sick thresh about in delirium
> and tear at the scabs with dirty fingernails.
> The cloud of infection hangs over the city[27]

'The Coasters', less obviously than in The 'Colony' perhaps but no less fundamentally, has a struggle with jarring witnesses at its core; interestingly, they are not 'the *other* sort' , but 'the ignorant' whose wellbeing is poetically structured to be predicated on the behaviour of the coasters, who, in leaving the ignorant to their illness while simultaneously reaping the benefits of their

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[21] Susan McKay, *Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People* (Belfast, 2000), 13.
[22] John Hewitt, 'The Coasters' in Longley and Ormsby (eds), *John Hewitt: Selected Poems*,71.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 71–2.
[25] Ibid., 71.
[26] Ibid., 71–2.
[27] Ibid., 73.

higher social position, fuel and exacerbate that illness[28]. Edna Longley's view that the poem 'indict[s the] socio-political conduct' of 'the Planter'[29] can certainly be said to be borne out. The last line 'You coasted too long', apart from being an admirably poetic and acerbic judgement, emphasises the reality that no separation of the previously hermetic coasters and jarring 'ignorant' witnesses will henceforth be possible and a new narrative certainty is now being struggled for[30].

The final poem this essay turns to is Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. The premise of the poem is deceptively simple: in the titular shed, abandoned 'since civil war days', 'A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole' , the only source of occasional sunlight[31]. After 'a half century, without visitors, in the dark', the narrator unwittingly discovers them by opening the door of the shed and ponders on their appearance[32]. While it is tempting to read this rediscovery, of malignant growth after 'half a century', as a metaphor for the re-emergence of violence in the island of Ireland in the 1960s, Kathleen Shields warns that 'the mushrooms cannot be reduced to the Protestants of Northern Ireland'[33] . Her warning is astute as such a simple reading of the poem risks missing much of Mahon's artistry. The complexity of the poem is notable even from the themes and images implied in the poem's two epigraphs. The second of these is a dedication to the author J.G. Farrell, whose book set in a decaying Anglo-Irish hotel in County Wexford during the Irish War of Independence inspires this poem's setting. The first epigraph though is a quote from Turkish Greek poet George Seferis' 'Mythistorema': 'Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels'[34] . The Asphodel Meadows are an area of the Greek Underworld where the souls of those who lived with neither heroism nor evil reside. In a sense, the asphodels are for the forgotten people of history, the people with no narrative. This is a strikingly fitting image for the content of the poem that follows. The lead up to the discovery of the mushrooms is an exquisitely paced, gradually-building crescendo of imagery.

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[28] Ibid., 71 [my emphasis].

[29] Edna Longley, 'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland', *The Crane Bag*, 9.1 Contemporary Culture Debate (1985), 26–40.

[30] Hewitt 'The Coasters', 71–3.

[31] Derek Mahon 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' in Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*), 296–7

[32] Ibid., 297.

[33] Kathleen Shields 'Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging', *Irish University Review*, 24(1994), 67–79.

[34] Quoted in Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*,296.

The fourth stanza explores the mushrooms' fifty year concealment, the

> deaths, the pale flesh flaking
> into the earth that nourished it;
> And nightmares, born of these and the grim
> Dominion of stale air and rank moisture[35].

The fifth stanza shifts to the appearance of the mushrooms to the narrator as he discovers them:

> … Magi, moonmen,
> Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
> Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by drought
> … food for worms[36]

The imagery reaches its crescendo of horror in the sixth and final stanza where the narrator anthropomorphises the mushrooms:

> They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
> To do something, to speak on their behalf
> Or at least not to close the door again.
> Lost people of Treblinka and Pompei!
> 'Save us, save us' they seem to say,
> … [']You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
> Let not our naive labours have been in vain!'[37]

While the mushrooms are imagined pleading like Seferis's plaintive epigraph, Peter McDonald points out that this last line 'makes explicit a parallel which has already been felt beneath the surface. The discovery of fungi in a disused shed carries the symbolic weight of all the "lost lives" that make up history'[38] . That Mahon adopts the imagery of death camps in relation to neglected mushrooms, successfully and with great humanity, is, it can be argued, a remarkable poetic achievement.

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[35] Mahon 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', 297.
[36] Ibid., 297.
[37] Ibid., 298.
[38] Quoted in Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (1996), 201.

That Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' struggles with jarring witnesses is not in doubt. Where from the poem's outset it is tempting to view such a witness as the disenfranchised Anglo-Irish Protestant, it soon becomes apparent the poem is not concerned with this-or-that jarring witness to a metanarrative but all the jarring witnesses throughout history who languish 'among the asphodels'[39] , deprived of any historical narrative. Writing about this poem, Scott Brewster states that 'The one who arrives late, taking the place of the "expropriated mycologist", is a witness, signatory or keyholder to the obscure but enduring memories and secrets lodged behind the door of the shed.[40]" If Brewster is right then 'the one who arrives late' is the poet, confronted with how to address the needs of jarring witnesses to history. That the poem ends with the above lines at least gives those jarring witnesses some narrative voice but the truth of that voice is justifiably weakened by the word 'seem' as Mahon's persona recognises the fundamental inability to give full, true voice to the voiceless, to fully incorporate the jarring witness to history[41].

A problem with Holton's methodology of exploring, and thus justifying, the extent to which the struggle with jarring witnesses is characteristic of modern fiction is his sole use of novels which could fall under the genre historical fiction. He points out that 'the novel, especially the historical novel, … is concerned with representing the temporal existence and legitimacy of particular communities and their points of view'[42] . It could be argued that his argument would be made all the stronger if the characteristic he emphasises were highlighted in other examples of fiction in literature. This is also a problem with judging the extent to which the struggle with jarring witnesses is characteristic of modern poetry from Northern Ireland. The historical circumstances of this poetry means that issues of 'legitimacy of particular communities' are, arguably, almost bound to be addressed by poets in those times and places. At the same time however, it is hardly the fault of John Hewitt and Derek Mahon that they were born into the circumstances they were and were blessed, or cursed, with the wish to analyse their lot through poetry. Perhaps, if given several hundred more pages, Holton would have examined jarring witnesses in Science Fiction and Magical Realism and there certainly seems to be scope for examining how jarring witnesses are dealt with

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[39] Quoted in Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 296.

[40] Scott Brewster 'A Residual Poetry: Heaney, Mahon and Hedgehog History', *Irish University Review*, 28 (1998), 56–67.

[41] Mahon 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', 298.

[42] Holton, *Jarring Witnesses*, 52.

in modern poetry in general. Nevertheless, this essay shows beyond doubt that the 'struggle with jarring witnesses' Robert Holton attributed as 'one of the definitive characteristics of modernist fiction' is fundamentally true of the modern Northern Irish poetry of John Hewitt and Derek Mahon[43]. Hewitt's 'The Colony' and 'The Coasters', while adopting respectively atoning and accusatory personae, both have a struggle with jarring witnesses at their core; 'The Colony', rather than straightforwardly comparing Roman colonisation to British colonisation of Northern Ireland, is fundamentally about the struggle between inter-communal atonement and threats, perceived or otherwise, to cultural survival. 'The Coasters' takes a different tack and, rather than having a 'native' and 'foreign' group jar against each other, sets inter-communal strife up as a class conflict, with the values of materialism espoused by the middle-classes fundamentally intertwined with the violence that pervades their society. Derek Mahon's poetry, while more oblique, struggles similarly with jarring witnesses. 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', harking back to a version of history overlooked by specifically Irish republican jarring witnesses can be said to, on the one hand implicitly legitimise the Protestant Ascendancy but, on the other hand, give voice to a lost narrative of Irish hybridity. 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' similarly deals with lost rather than subjugated narratives but its scope is so vast as to illustrate, albeit metaphorically, the pressure on poets or artists to give voice to the jarring witnesses of history.

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[43] Ibid., 251.