

The English Patient
And the healing co-ordinates of 'dailiness'
Janet Lewison

During the final stages of Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, one of the protagonists, Caravaggio bids farewell to another, Kirpal Singh with the words, 'I shall have to learn how to miss you'¹. Such an avowal seems to address and embrace the central concerns of the text, concerns I wish to interrogate in this paper: the problematic representation of loss in *The English Patient*. This loss is foregrounded through the text's invested interest in the reestablishment of 'dailiness' and routine, which in restoring domestic structures and co-ordinates of the ordinary, enable certain tentative healing narratives to take place. Furthermore in this investment in 'dailiness' the text addresses the role of the ordinary in the inevitable confrontation with mortality. This inevitability is all the more marked as the central character in the novel is barely alive, and therefore saturates all his narratives with a sense of 'lastness' and finality. Whether this 'lastness' becomes transmuted into sacred experience we shall see during the course of this paper.

This beautifully evocative admission of Caravaggio, 'I shall have to learn how to miss you', situates him in an ambivalent but potentially healing relation to mourning in the text. For 'I shall have to learn how to miss you', suggests that the expression and translation of the 'missing' of Kip, though difficult and well-nigh impossible in the present moment of telling, has at least some provisional possibility of expression in the future. This ambivalent promise of Caravaggio significantly transcends its literal context and destination by hinting at the possibility for some restabilisation of the I/thou relationship in a world that had all but extinguished any notion of reciprocity, with a war that ended with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

This cataclysmic curtailment of Japan's involvement in the war also brings an end to the brief community that had been formed at the villa itself, as the disparate characters are impelled to return to their separate cultures and attempt to reassume their pre-war lives. However, it is my contention in this paper that Caravaggio's words perfectly capture the transforming ethos of this transiently formed society at the villa, for the words he expresses are only possible and utterable because of the reorienting restorative experiences he has undergone in this singular setting, with his strangely assorted companions, not least of whom is the literally burnt-out figure of the English Patient himself.

The Patient's terrible injuries are reflected in the historical context of the novel, for Ondaatje has produced his text against an horrific backdrop of twentieth century shame. The novel is specifically set against a series of apocalyptic events that serve to underline the individual suffering we encounter in the testimonies of the characters at the villa. Indeed it is pertinent to my argument here to refer to these events as 'caesurae' in history, gaps or pauses in the apparent relentless linearity of history where language proves insufficient to encompass the terror and inhumanity of such moments. Such a backdrop includes Mussolini's capitulation against Hitler in 1943, the former's infamous execution, and the bloody retreat of the German army from Italy in 1945. Auschwitz had finally been liberated by the far from unknowing

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¹ M. ONDAATJE, *The English Patient*, Bloomsbury, London 1992, p.289.

allies in January 1945 and Japan's activities in the war ended by the release of two atomic bombs.

On a macro-level these events form the public historical details that act as frames and contexts for the micro-level of more specifically personal experiences at the ruined villa. Trauma therefore pervades every aspect of Ondaatje's text, manifesting itself repeatedly through the thwarted narratives of the characters, riddled with pauses or caesurae that serve to highlight the suffering that haunts such necessarily delayed testimonies. The nurse Hana is profoundly affected by the death of her Canadian father Patrick, a loss she can barely acknowledge, let alone express. Her war has been a war impotently fought against the all-encroaching inevitability of serial death. Caravaggio, the resourceful hybrid of thief and spy, has been mutilated into silence and comes to the villa to seek out a familiar bond severed by the war. The Sikh Sapper Kip visits the villa in the course of his military operations and reveals himself as an isolated figure, used by the Allies as a necessary but highly disposable military tool. Finally there is the English Patient himself, an enigmatic figure whose burnt-out physicality and elusive identity fragments his recurring obsession with the death of his great love- Katherine Clifton. The ruined, violated villa temporarily inhabited by this group of profoundly damaged individuals thus reflects the wider situation of the text coming all together in the disfigured remains that is the English Patient himself. I began this paper suggesting that Caravaggio's confession and promise, 'I shall have to learn how to miss you' expresses a tentative desire for an admission and articulation of loss for the other, albeit in an unspecified future, and I would now like to interrogate how the desire for the realisation of this avowal might come about.

Ondaatje's text delivers a world dependent upon two pivotal concepts, Firstly, that the damage inflicted by war can only be challenged via some restoration of dailiness and social interaction within the lives of the estranged individuals. They need a familiar series of co-ordinates in order to reawaken a sense of relatedness and allegiance, inspiring fidelity and compassion. Secondly that the nascent form of healing in the novel's end is dependent upon the presence of the cinder-like figure of the English Patient who through his provocative ambiguity and wandering often allegorical narratives, encourages the inhabitants of the villa to testify to their buried and disparate experiences. It is the very anonymity and ironic self-sufficiency of the dying man which encourages such trust and admission from the others, as it liberates them from specifically held roles and behaviours. Each individual is free to participate within the wide-ranging anecdotal realm of the dying voice (that is the patient himself) jettisoning their previously held narratives and agendas for the alleviating domains of curiosity and imagination. If all narrators are significantly 'dead' to the social world, then the predicament of the Patient is markedly sited at a threshold between life and death. This again engenders his strangely absent presence both liberating and compelling for his companions.

If I turn firstly then to the novel's predilection for 'dailiness', ritual and ceremony, fascinations which are announced from the beginning of the text, I hope to reveal that such 'dailiness' also suffuses the ordinary with the extraordinary, the profane with the sacred. This investment stems from the communal knowledge that the 'day' itself might well be the last day and that every action, thought and conversation might be cut short and remain incomplete. The sense of 'lastness' therefore consecrates the narratives with an overriding acknowledgement of personal responsibility and intimacy. It also situates the characters within a context that is healing because it nurtures through the re-establishment of routine and domestic habit

which give both security and perspective; places to grieve from and towards. These concerns are implied from the very opening of the text as I have said, where Hana is described tending her 'last' patient in a language which is both meditative and sacred. The detail communicates a ceremony centred on the present moment, barely hinting at a past that seems incidental and almost a matter of syntax:

Every four days she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet.

She wets a washcloth and holding it above his ankles squeezes the water onto him, looking up as he murmurs, seeing his smile. Above the shins the burns are the worst. Beyond purple. Bone...There are stories the man recites into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk. He wakes in the painted arbour that surrounds him with its spilling flowers, arms of great trees.

He remembers picnics, a woman who kissed parts of his body that are now burned into the colour of aubergine².

Ondaatje's narrative suggests a world of elemental ritual and attention. Tenderness assumes Biblical connotation and possibility. Hana's care of the patient interestingly resists overtly clinical duties and seems concerned with the surface of the body indicating that her relationship with the Patient is palliative in a metaphysical rather than overtly medical sense (Hana is the ideal reader of surfaces being bound by her profession to read the surfaces of the body as 'symptoms' of sickness irrevocably bound up with the body's impending invisibility, leaving in the case of the English Patient only the residue of the voice). Recollection in this scene is so intrinsic to the daily existence of the patient that ironically it does not need to bind itself to the past. The memories are ever present in their infinite fragility as last narratives, last thoughts, permanent companions unto death. Indeed the very permeability of the threshold between recollected time and present time engenders a verbal universe that is both lyrical and transformative. Significantly the nurse tends him as a lover, mother and friend, avoiding the medically graphic for a special vocabulary of intimacy wrought by an almost leisurely familiarity and expertise. The daily can be savoured and enjoyed allowing the appreciation of a reality where co-ordinates can be reinstated or restored.

As the text progresses so these co-ordinates are developed and extended, encompassing reading, conversation and the reintroduction of ordinary domestic habits and routines which give shape and orientation to the lives of the characters at the villa. This metamorphosis from the chaos and flux beyond the villa to the villa's atmosphere of hesitant familiarity and trust, is slowly achieved through the accommodation and acknowledgement of the needs and potential needs of the other. This seems to be primarily actualised through acts of positive anticipation in the novel, where one subject actively hears another, and subsequently listens to all that is both spoken and unspoken. The seemingly detached narratives of the Patient reveal this clearly, and are reinforced by the satellite conversations of the others. Hence the protagonists are maimed in some way by their experiences of war, so all these 'patients' administer to each other redrawing the role of healer and saviour. For example in a reported conversation when the nurse Hana has been told about the ensuing end of the war, she visits the English Patient and vows that she will remain with him and administer to his burns. A promise that implicitly emphasises her own need for sanctuary as much as the Patient's need for care:

² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

How old are you?

Twenty.

There was a duke, he said, who when he was dying wanted to be carried halfway up the tower in Pisa so he could die looking out into middle distance.

A friend of my father's wanted to die while Shanghai-dancing. Don't know what it is.

He had just heard of it himself.

What does your father do?

He is... he is in the war.

You're in the war too³.

This desultory conversation that manifestly avoids explicit disclosure on both sides, co-creates the basis of their subsequent relationship at the villa. For the Patient's initial question and his apparently anecdotal response though seemingly unrelated, suggests that something significantly has been uttered and heard, beneath the codes of this ostensibly disconnected conversation. So that the apparent fragmentation of this actually denotes, 'the mark of a coherence all the firmer in that it has to come undone in order to be reached'⁴. For ironically it is the 'Patient' who has recognised the undivulged disclosure and transference between the nurse and himself, encapsulated in his enquiry about her age and extended through the safety of a fiction surrounding a possibly historical 'duke', to the veiled and circumvented reference to her father's death. As the conversation closes, so the Patient diffuses the pain of her near admission, by a reminder that is a recognition and appreciation of her isolation and suffering. He echoes her vocabulary in order to affirm the resonance of their ensuing relationship. Such an echo is enhancing as it allows the other the dignity of the unsaid whilst presenting a receptive dynamic that contains the potential for nurture and healing. It is deeply comforting to know that we have been truly heard and listened to, especially when this 'holding' protects and preserves our need for secrecy and indirection. This exchange so representative of other exchanges in the text involving the group at the villa, foregrounds the ease by which narrative can slip into allegory, retranslating and reconstituting the permanent and the known, through the healing dimension of dialogue that both hears and accepts the other's otherness and the others need for otherness. This acceptance reveals an intensity of exchange that belies its provisional almost improvised status and tone. Emotions are excavated through narratives that permit safe distances between narrator and audience, between the teller and the tale. If we look at an episode near the opening of the text we can see how this predilection for allegory might be generated initially:

It is late afternoon. His hands play with a piece of sheet, the back of his fingers caressing it.

I fell burning into the desert.

They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert.

We were in the sand sea, now and then crossing dry riverbeds. Nomads, you see. Bedouin. I flew down and the sand itself caught fire. They saw me stand up naked out of it. The leather helmet on my head in flames. They strapped me onto a cradle, a carcass boat, and feet thudded along as they ran with me.

I had broken the spareness of the desert⁵.

Here the English Patient's arresting testimony is movingly framed by the futile movements of his hands on the sheet. He is aware simultaneously of the day's transience and his own impending oblivion. This awareness transmutes his

³ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁴ M. BLANCHOT, *The Writing of Disaster*, English translation by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 1986, p.60

⁵ ONDAATJE., *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5

predicament and destiny into allegory, suggestively aligning the narrator with Icarus, rewriting his burns as the scorch marks of a transcendent even timeless passion embracing a messianic imperative for sacrifice, yet delivering this allegory in a vocabulary that is ambiguous enough to be interpreted in a more commonplace manner. It manages to stand as a 'last text' and talisman as well as being lyrical reportage, resisting interpretation whilst encouraging it. It is worth mentioning at this point that this fascination with allegory seems to be shared by all the protagonists in the text, revealing that the need to allegorise is contiguous to any act of affirmative listening and retrospective reshaping of memory. Naturally, the violently mortal realm of the villa reinforces this predilection and the reader is aware that such narratives as this operate as linguistic 'gifts' from speaker to listener, for in this episode the English Patient subscribes to Hana's need for a transmutation of clinical reality, whilst also revealing the singularity of the Patient's love for Katherine. Revelation and disclosure can thus take place within an atmosphere of trust and accepting mutuality. Whilst the healing power of the text is at least in part generated by the fact that no one narrative subsumes another in its wake, the English Patient's stories do serve as the recurring spine and signature of the text. They seductively combine all manner of personal and historical narrative, creating a vocabulary of intensity and power. This vocabulary is fed into the narratives of the others, offering them the security of 'influence' whilst complementing their own distinctive perspectives which could be read as a form of ventriloquism where the nearness of one voice to another is realised through their choice of language and style of delivery. This ventriloquism is facilitated through the ostensible anonymity of the English Patient, as his seeming lack of formal identity permits far greater freedom of transference and role-playing. This freedom relocates itself in the changing dynamics between certain protagonists, bestowing the romance of Hana and Kip with the same predilection for allegory that we initially encounter in the Patient's love for Katherine. This positivisation of unfixity is in keeping with the recurring trope of fragmentation/ruination being a necessary stage for physical re-assembly through mourning. The 'missing' of another (even when that other may be present still) could be implied through the (un)conscious selection of certain linguistic registers. Just as the Patient's narratives are saturated with the resonant experience of 'missing' someone or something or someplace, so the narratives surrounding Hana and Kip are impregnated by a similarly evoked sense of loss. The longer Hana is compelled to listen to the English Patient, the more her own narratives may temporarily 'borrow' and rework the perspectives she has enjoyed. She can then choose to filter her own voice through the voice of another, a filter which protectively veils as it discloses. Thus she authors her own condition through the protection of another's vocabulary, who has bestowed his narratives on his listener in a time-old tradition of the Bard, transforming pedantry into seduction and reportage into allegory:

He puts his hands up into the loose sleeves of her dress and cups her shoulders with his hands. If she swerves now, his hands will go with her. She begins to lean, puts all her weight into her fall backwards, trusting him to come with her, trusting his hands to break the fall. Then he will curl himself up, his feet in the air, just his hands and arms and mouth on her, the rest of the body the tail of a mantis. The lamp is still strapped against the muscle and sweat of his left arm. Her face slips into the light to kiss and lick and taste. His forehead towelling itself in the wetness of her hair⁶.

He looked up into the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so that her knee that had poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs so that she would be immune to the human⁷.

Here we see clearly a striking uniformity of tone and style. Individual voices have become synthesised and share vocabulary that privileges certain knowledges of the world that are idiosyncratic and personal. Both passages show a fascination with the intimate geography of the body, and the elevation of individual erotic trust to that of sacred experience. The meditative specificity of each extract is almost interchangeable with the other and it is my contention that this correspondence foregrounds the presence of a compassionate, non-forgetful form of listening as a means of revealing the safety and strength of the relationship at the ruined villa.

Finally, in regard to personality, we shall reflect on how the very limited development of our capacity for listening is responsible for much suffering and misery, and how the cultivation of this capacity can contribute to, and is affected by, the forming of moral character, encouraging communicative relationships, awakening a compassionate sensibility and the understanding it bears with it, motivating a concern for reciprocity and respect for differences.

If we relate this assertion to the novel, it would explain why the Patient has to be neither 'friend' nor 'foe'. For the rehabilitation of the traumatised post-war individual in the text is dependent upon the reestablishment of the I/thou relationship that accepts and embraces difference. When this acceptance is not present then we see illustrated the lack of compassionate, imaginative listening painfully represented in the conversation between the English Patient and the British Officer at El Taj, where the former's desperate plea for assistance in the rescuing of Katherine was refused.

'Are you telling me that the English did not believe you?'

'No one listened.'

'Why?'

'I didn't give them the right name.'

'Yours?'

'I gave them mine.'

'Then what-'

'Hers. Her name. The name of her husband⁸'.

This scene ironically highlights the dangers of careless and inattentive listening. The inflexibility of the listener destroys any possibility of 'meeting' the underlying message of the speaker. The horror of such negligent hearing is rendered immediately apparent as we realise that this neglect condemns Katherine Clifton to a solitary and painful death in a desert cave, and the English Patient to a lingering living-death in his final 'missing' of her. The evolutionary dimension to dialogue that I illustrated in the earlier exchange between Hana and the Patient is absent. We also

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 248

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250

notice that the intransigence of the Patient himself in claiming his beloved as his own namesake indirectly contributes to the murder of Katherine. Neither male figure recognises the autonomy of Katherine; she is a persistent object of exchange between husband, lover and even the Allied Army itself. The act of listening in this case is shown to be reductive in that it is selective and lacking in sensitivity. Thus the exigencies of war have degraded one of the most essential means of communication by leaving no space for the unsaid at all. Significantly, as the unsaid dominates the narratives of those at the villa, it is possible to argue that the villa provides the protagonists with a convalescent space in which they can begin to heal themselves through relearning the skills of listening. Such convalescence of language (in all its manifestations) generates a resurgence of respect for community, through an acknowledgement of difference.

The novel's fascination with the act of 'good' listening coalesces dramatically in the scene where Kip learns of the atomic explosions in Japan. The radio is of course a particularly fleshless medium and gives no possibility of response.

She sees him in the field, his hands clasped over his head, then realises this is a gesture not of pain, but of his need to hold the earphones right against his brain. He is a hundred yards away from her in the lower field when she hears a scream emerge from his body which had never raised its voice amongst them. He sinks to his knees, as if unbuckled. Stays like that and slowly gets up and moves in a diagonal towards his tent, enters it, and closes the flaps behind him. There is a dry crackle of thunder and she sees her arms darken⁹.

Hana's initial interpretation of Kip's predicament is dependent upon the visual translation of the 'signs' before her. It is the cry unleashed by Kip's despair that reveals the true significance of his behaviour. Thus the sense of hearing supplants that of sight as a means of assimilating experience. His subsequent silence reveals his understanding that the Allies could only bomb Japan because Japan was a non-white nation and therefore an eminently disposable other. Kip has heard both 'messages' simultaneously; and understandably feels estranged from his white companions at the Italian villa, revealing as it does a break/caesura in their ability to cohere any further the innate fragmentation of their war experiences. However if we return to Caravaggio's avowal: 'I shall have to learn how to miss you', with which I began this paper we may detect some tentative expression of hope that transcends even the horror of such a tragic parting. For Caravaggio's words are accompanied by 'A big hug'. Kip: 'felt the stubble against his skin for the first time. He felt drawn in, gathered into the muscles.' Physical tenderness commutes the sorrow of such an abrupt parting into a promise and even a gift. The time spent by the individuals at the villa has re-educated their response to others. Intimacy is given space and is no longer 'eschewed'. Caravaggio's words are followed by Hana's letter to her stepmother Clara in which she directly acknowledges her missing of her father for the first time:

This is my first letter in years, Clara, and I am not used to the formality of them. I have spent the last few months living with three others, and our talk has been slow, casual. I am not used to talking in any way but that now¹⁰.

This letter identifies the healing presence of 'talk' at the ruined villa. The non-threatening, non-violating conversations that have taken place there, have reintroduced the presence of the other as a means of rehabilitation and nurture. Hana

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292

like Caravaggio has gained perspective. Such perspectives are delivered out of the enabling routines of the daily, the enriching possibilities of 'propinquity.' This restabilisation of the I/thou relationship lends admission to both the pain of 'missing' another and the need for that pain to be transmuted into other experiences. For in the process of 'missing' another, the characters sacrifice the singularity of their personal losses (through the act of testimony) and integrate their special losses into those of a more social and communal nature. Thus Hana admits of Patrick;

He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography?¹¹

Such a question poignantly communicates Hana's despair at her inability to save Patrick and underlines her near epiphany in recognising the nature of the transference between herself and the English Patient. This revelation shifts the narrative outwards from the intimacy of the villa to the wider world beyond emphasising the implications of healing as a means of renewal. As one character attains some tenable transcendence of circumstance, so those circumstances must change. However the ensuing separations still seem to invite readings of both the transcendent and the sacred:

Around three a.m. he feels a presence in the room. He sees, for a pulse of a moment, a figure at the foot of the bed, against the wall or painted onto it perhaps, not quite discernible in the darkness of the foliage beyond the candlelight. He mutters something, something he had wanted to say, but there is silence and the slight brown figure, which could be just a night shadow, does not move. A poplar. A man with Plumes. A swimming figure. And he would not be so lucky, he thinks, to speak to the young sapper again. If the figure turns around there will be paint on his back, where he slammed in grief against the mural of tree. When the candle dies out he will be able to see this....

His hand reaches out slowly and touches his book and returns to his dark chest. Nothing else moves in the room¹².

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of the cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacle¹³.

So we glimpse the final moments of the Patient's life through a death scene that seems both elevating and spiritual. The strange synchronicity that exists between a gesture of Hana's and one of Kirpal Singh's concludes the novel with a sense of the sublime; relationships may only be finished, they may never be finished with. This 'final' movement of the Patient touching his specially annotated edition of Herodotus, with a gesture usually reserved for the Bible completes his ultimate narrative and life. But the life of Almasy (if we believe it is he) is so inextricably woven with his compendium text, that it almost appears as if his death was yet another narrative contained within the Herodotus. The remoteness of Almasy's voice has become so synthesised within the tales and the characters he has reanimated within his wandering narratives, that the singularity of each individual and event has become fully erased by a final fusion and harmony. This synthesis in death mirrors the progressive ventriloquism in narrative I have remarked upon earlier, and suggests that the healing capacity of the community formed at the villa is as influential upon the Patient as on any of the resident listeners. The final moment of his life is but a 'pulse', a detail

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302

which communicates the 'pause' between life and death, and yields up an enigmatic visitation of the English Patient's last text. It is possible to read this 'pulse' as both a literal and metaphorical pause, just as Katherine remarked earlier upon the link between the pulse as a means to both affirmation and destruction.

Her hand touched me at the wrist.
'If I gave you my life, you would drop it. Wouldn't you?'
I didn't say anything¹⁴.

Her challenge to the English Patient contains all the ambivalent threads of intimacy as her instinctive physical response to her silent lover predicts the nature of their tempestuous affair. She is irresistible in the direct admission of her desire. Passion is clearly conjoined to annihilation. But there is also a hesitation before the finality of such destiny as the question reveals. And the silence of the Patient could be the silence of supplication as much as denial. Thus the identity of the strangely comforting visitor to the Patient's death bed remains open. And this openness engenders a palpable sense of the sacred, as petty individuation and personal remoteness yield to an harmonious elision of being. Just as the narratives of one character have been ventriloquised by another, so this last narrative offers the reader a gift of undifferentiation and mystical clarity. 'When the candle burns out he will be able to see this.' This emotive declaration promises that the illumination granted to the patient lies beyond any literal or profane act of seeing. It suggests the possibility of an afterlife and the infinite continuation of secular love. This affirmation is repeated in the final narrative of the novel where Kip's incidental action fuses with that of Hana ensuring the perpetuation of such syntheses.

The English Patient is thus a novel which celebrates the healing powers of both community and storytelling through the creation of a healing dynamic and space between the self and the other. To borrow the terms of the text itself, 'it was propinquity... the propinquity of two or three bodies.' Only through such language could the caesura between one historical moment and one damaged individual and another be crossed. Caravaggio's words are therefore a reply to the silence of history; his promise made possible by a novel that celebrates fidelity to the other that a warring world has refused to countenance. 'I shall have to learn how to miss you', relocates the subject in the direction of the newly listening other through a 'choreography' that has re-established the pulse of the daily and rediscovered both its safety and its sacredness.

In the library the fuse box is in mid-air, nudged off the counter by Caravaggio when he turned to Hana's gleeful yell in the hall. Before it reaches the floor Kip's body slides underneath it, and he catches it in his hand.

Caravaggio glances down to see the young man's face blowing out all the air quickly through his cheeks.

He thinks suddenly he owes him a life...¹⁵.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208