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## THE THEME OF *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* RECONSIDERED

### I.

Since *Wuthering Heights* was written and published ten years after Victoria's accession and almost at the end of a decade in which fiction for the first time in its history had largely concerned itself with contemporary social problems, it does seem odd that Emily Brontë's novel has never been thoroughly related to the Victorian context. Of the two critics who have tried to refer the book to this context, Arnold Kettle takes a very restricted view of the novel and Richard Chase refers only briefly to the child-lovers, Linton and the younger Cathy, and to the convention of the happy marriage with which the novel ends.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, then, *Wuthering Heights* was written by a young, unmarried woman (the sort of person upon whom Victorian pressures were exerted very heavily), a woman, moreover, who had grown up in Haworth, a small West Riding village very much affected by the industrial revolution in the woollen industry which was a nineteenth-century rather than eighteenth-century phenomenon. In her responses, her very rebelliousness and otherwise, Emily Brontë was essentially a Victorian, for it was a Victorian world and not a rather nebulous eighteenth-century type rural world to which she was reacting. This is not, of course, to deny, as we shall see later, that the novel has a universal application—it would hardly be a great work of art if it had none.

But, since whatever else *Wuthering Heights* may be it is at least a love-story, it might seem pertinent, one would think, to first enquire what was the Victorian attitude to sex, love, and marriage. It would be misleading to say, as has been commonly assumed and frequently asserted, that a heavy repression fell on sexuality during the Victorian period. It would be much truer to say that throughout much of the

nineteenth century a very heavy repression fell on certain specific forms of sexuality among the middle and upper classes. This repression seems to have been reinforced by the tendencies towards refinement and idealization which reached their culmination during the Victorian period. The situation and its origins are complex, though there does seem to be a psychological relationship between the repression falling on genital forms of sexuality and Victorian acquisitiveness which was socially necessary to the accumulation of capital in an era of rapid industrial expansion. The features of Victorian sexuality relevant to *Wuthering Heights* are as follows. Active female sexuality was frowned upon. Dr William Acton went so far as to assert in an authoritative medical textbook published only eleven years after *Wuthering Heights* that it was a "vile aspersion" to suggest that woman was capable of sexual feeling at all.<sup>2</sup> Men were also encouraged to believe that anything other than the most infrequent sexual indulgence was physically weakening and positively harmful. The one form of sexuality allowed woman without reservation was the exercise of her maternal function. Otherwise she was expected to remain completely passive. Not only did man idealize woman as a pure, shrinking, and submissive being and almost deify her in her maternal aspect but woman was also carefully instructed to revere that noble creature, her husband, and to submit herself to him with gratitude and devotion, as we can see from works like the influential and widely circulating books of Mrs Sara Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (London, 1842), *The Wives of England. Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (London, 1843), and *The Women of England* (London, 1838).<sup>3</sup>

In *Wuthering Heights* we can see these attitudes reflected in a critical context. Thus, the typical upper-and middle-class marital relationship is represented in the marriage of Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton. There is the strong social motivation on Catherine's part, coupled with the romantic idealization of the husband, a superficial yet genuine infatuation which follows a conventional pattern and betrays itself in clichés:

He is handsome, and pleasant to be with...And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband. ...I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says. I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely and altogether. (Chap. IX)

Mary Visick has pointed out that Emily Brontë clearly intends us to understand that the love-relationship between Catherine and Edgar has an unmistakable sexual side;<sup>4</sup> when Heathcliff asks if Isabella is Edgar's heir, Catherine retorts: "I should be sorry to think so...Half a dozen nephews shall erase her title, please Heaven." (Chap. X) Sure enough, in view of what has just been remarked about the Victorians, Catherine's sexual life with Edgar is presented in terms of a vigorous repeated maternity, the only terms it is presented in throughout the novel. Nelly Dean's observation that "I believe I may assert that they were really in possession of deep and growing happiness" (Chap. X) is a fair assessment of the marriage, according to Victorian standards, and is limited only in the ultimate context of the novel. Again, we note the feebleness of the normal male within the conventional Victorian context. This point is stressed when Lockwood's insipid romanticism over the girl at the seaside is exposed with a keen irony. (Chap. I) Later he expresses a characteristic aversion towards active female passion in respect of the two Catherines, mother and daughter. (Chap. XIV) Lockwood is, perhaps, the extreme case of insipid conventional romanticism; Edgar Linton is more the average. Yet when Heathcliff contrasts himself, in this respect, with Edgar, there can be little doubt that Emily Bronte is referring to virility:

"Yet I was a fool to fancy for a moment that she valued Edgar Linton's attachment more than mine. If he loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have: the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough, as her whole affection be monopolized by him...He might as well plant an oak in a flower-pot, and expect it to thrive, as imagine he can restore her to vigour in the soil of his shallow cares!" (Chap. XIV)

All this need not imply that Emily Brontë was fully conscious of the issues in the crudest physical sense (she may have been, of course) but only that what the age sought to deny a stark and honest fantasy insisted on restoring. And Catherine, from her point of view, also makes the situation clear when she contrasts Linton's "frost" and "moon-beam" with the "fire" and "lightning" of Heathcliff and herself. (Chap. IX) A very different form of sexual love from that approved of by the Victorians is being presented here. We can see some proof of this in the reactions of some of the early reviewers of the novel: "The aspect of the Jane and Rochester animals in their native state, as Catherine and

Heathfield [*sic*], is too odiously and abominably pagan to be palatable even to the most vitiated class of English readers".<sup>5</sup> Certainly, in the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, the female too is far from passive. She does not remain that tamed, domesticated creature who returns from Thrushcross Grange, swathed in white pantalettes from waist to ankles, sweet and refined:

Instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in...I removed the habit, and there shone forth, beneath a grand plaid frock, white trousers, and burnished shoes; and, while her eyes sparkled joyfully when the dogs came bounding up to welcome her, she dare hardly touch them lest they should fawn upon her splendid garments. (Chap. VII)

In those fantasies which enable her to live out the life she has rejected by marrying Edgar she returns to the state of the wild, energetic girl who would rush off to the moors to sport with her savage lover (Chap. VI), the girl who sobbed in her dream until the very angels in Heaven cast her out on the heath at Wuthering Heights to join her Heathcliff (Chap. IX):

"But, supposing at twelve years old, I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger: an exile, and outcast, thenceforth, from what had been my world—You may fancy a glimpse of the abyss where I grovelled!...Oh, I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors! I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free...and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills. Open the window again wide: fasten it open! Quick, why don't you move?"

And sliding from the bed before I could hinder her, she crossed the room, walking very uncertainly, threw it back, and bent out, careless of the frosty air that cut about her shoulders as keen as a knife. I entreated, and finally attempted to force her to retire. But I soon found her delirious strength much surpassed mine. (Chap. XII)

It has been objected that the passion between Heathcliff and Catherine is not a sexual passion at all and, though I believe this is hardly true, I think we should take note of this objection. Certainly, in

so far as Heathcliff and Catherine are frustrated in their passion and in so far as they represent non-personal elements in human beings, the word "sexual" takes on a much wider and more profound meaning than we normally accord it. There is, indeed, a mystical element in the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff, for sexuality impersonally considered does have its mystical (or what has been called its mystical) side. Since sexuality seeks to ensure the survival of the race, it necessarily has its eternal, its cosmic dimension. Furthermore, the sexual relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine stands as a type of instinctive energy in general. And it is significant that repression in the Victorian period fell not only on certain forms of sexuality but on many aspects of instinctive life; evangelical prohibition and refinement extended to gluttony, intemperance, excretion and dirtiness generally, anger and violence.<sup>6</sup> We can see many aspects of this general situation, for example, in *Vanity Fair*, in Mr Pitt's influence on Sir Pitt's conduct when he is present at Queen's Crawley. (Chap. IX) Moreover, there may be an intimate connection between sexuality and aggressiveness, and particularly between frustrated sexuality and violence. And so we find that Heathcliff, as the savage and even cruel demon-lover, and Catherine, as his active partner, are a protest, a criticism of the kind of relationship represented by the marriage of Catherine and Edgar and of the Victorian virtues of duty, humanity, pity, and charity, which such a marriage expressed, an affirmation, instead, of man and woman's more primitive needs:

"That is quite possible," remarked Heathcliff, forcing himself to seem calm: "quite possible that your master should have nothing but common humanity and a sense of duty to fall back upon. But do you imagine that I shall leave Catherine to his *duty* and *humanity*? and can you compare my feelings respecting Catherine to his...I would have torn his heart out, and drunk his blood!...I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain...Oh, I've no doubt she's in hell among you! I guess by her silence, as much as anything, what she feels. You say she is often restless, and anxious looking: is that a proof of tranquillity? You talk of her mind being unsettled. How the devil could it be otherwise in her frightful isolation? And that insipid, paltry creature attending her from *duty* and *humanity*! From *pity* and *charity*! He might as well plant an oak in a flower-pot, and expect it to thrive, as imagine he can restore her to vigour in the soil of his shallow cares! Let us settle it at once; will you stay here, and am I to fight my way to Catherine over Linton and his footmen?" (Chap. XIV)

Critics have not been slow to see in the second generation a kind of compromise.<sup>7</sup> But, in my view, the question still remains, What is the true nature and meaning of this compromise? Although it finally provides a partial resolution of the novel, the compromise is foreshadowed early on in the story of the second generation in the description of young Cathy:

A real beauty in face, with the Earnshaws' handsome dark eyes, but the Lintons' fair skin, and small features, and yellow curling hair. Her spirit was high, though not rough, and qualified by a heart sensitive and lively to excess in its affections. That capacity for intense attachments reminded me of her mother: still she did not resemble her: for she could be soft and mild as a dove, and she had a gentle voice and pensive expression: her anger was never furious: her love never fierce: it was deep and tender. However, it must be acknowledged, she had faults to foil her gifts. A propensity to be saucy was one; and a perverse will. (Chap. XVIII)

There is a careful parallel to this description a few pages later in the portrait of the young adult Hareton:

A well-made, athletic youth, good looking in features, and stout and healthy, but attired in garments befitting his daily occupation of working on the farm, and lounging among the moors after rabbits and game. Still, I thought I could detect in his physiognomy a mind owning better qualities than his father [Hindley] ever possessed. Good things lost amid a wilderness of weeds, to be sure, whose rankness far over-topped their neglected growth; yet notwithstanding, evidence of a wealthy soil that might yield luxuriant crops under other and favourable circumstances. (Chap. XVIII)

We can see how suggestions of the traits of the older generation are carefully balanced, here, in the promise of a new and more harmonious whole. When we see how young Cathy, repentant at having wronged Hareton, transforms him, bringing his personality to maturity, kindling his intelligence and nobility through her loving tuition (Chap. XXXIII), we should recall how Nelly Dean watched the young Heathcliff lapse into the sloth of degradation and ignorance when Catherine begins to reject him on her return from Thrushcross Grange (Chap. VIII). Ironically, Heathcliff's vengeance creates a situation in which Heathcliff has taken Hindley's place in a new triangular relationship with young Catherine and Hareton which repeats the old relationship between himself, Catherine, and Hindley, and it is, significantly, when Heathcliff recognizes this that he loses the will to further vengeance and is then able to achieve his desire for final union with Catherine:

He seemed ready to tear Catherine in pieces...when of a sudden, his fingers relaxed, he shifted his grasp from her head, to her arm, and gazed intently in her face..."I don't care for striking: I can't take the trouble to raise my hand!...I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction...Five minutes ago, Hareton seemed a personification of my youth, not a human being...In the first place, his startling likeness to Catherine connected him fearfully with her...Well, Hareton's aspect was the ghost of my immortal love, of my wild endeavours to hold my right, my degradation, my pride, my happiness, and my anguish...his society is no benefit, rather an aggravation of the constant torment I suffer: and it partly contributes to render me regardless how he and his cousin go on together. I can give them no attention, anymore." (Chap. XXXIII)

We see the compromise working when Hareton and the younger Catherine choose to live at Thrushcross Grange after their marriage, while Wuthering Heights is abandoned to the ghosts of the elder Catherine and Heathcliff. (Chap. XXXIV).

## II.

We cannot fully understand what the theme of *Wuthering Heights* is without taking into account the vision of the novel. Most people would agree that, in a general, possibly vague, sense, this vision is a tragic one. Yet perhaps we ought to go further and appreciate that *Wuthering Heights* is a tragedy in the highest and strictest sense. If we compare, for example, the episode in which Cathy's ghost haunts the chamber in which Lockwood is sleeping with the first appearance of the ghost in Hoffmann's story "Das Majorat", which may have helped to suggest the incident in *Wuthering Heights*, the tragic power of this latter incident is particularly striking. Hoffmann aims purely at terror, at a *numinous* effect:

So I took up the book [Schiller's *Ghost-seer*]; I read and read; and my imagination became ever more and more excited. I came to the marvelously enthralling description of the wedding feast at Count von V-'s; and just as I was reading of the entrance of Jeronimo's bloody figure, the door leading from the gallery into the antechamber flew open with a tremendous bang.

I started to my feet in terror; the book fell from my hands. Within the very same moment, however, all was still again; and I began to be ashamed of my childish fright ....Having thus calmed my fears, I picked up my book from the floor, and again threw myself into the armchair. But now I heard a sound of soft, slow, measured footsteps moving diagonally across the hall, accompanied at intervals by a sighing and a moaning; and in this sighing and moaning there was expressed the deepest trouble, the most hopeless grief, that a human being can know...I calmed my fears again. But now there was a

scratching at the new portion of the wall, while louder and deeper sighs were unescapably audible, as if they were being gasped out by someone in the last throes of mortal anguish...the blood ran cold in my veins; the cold sweat, too, stood upon my forehead; and I remained sitting in my chair as if transfixed, quite unable to rise, still less to cry out.<sup>8</sup>

Emily Brontë, however, mingles both terror and pathos in that precise, complex manner which Aristotle formulated as the true tragic effect:

I was lying in the oak closet, and I heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard, also, the fir-bough repeat its teasing sound, and ascribed it to the right cause: but it annoyed me so much, that I resolved to silence it, if possible; and, I thought, I rose and endeavoured to unhasp the casement. The hook was soldered into the staple: a circumstance observed by me when awake, but forgotten. "I must stop it, nevertheless!" I muttered, knocking my knuckles through the glass, and stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch: instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand! The intense horror of nightmare came over me: I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, "Let me in—let me in!" "Who are you?" I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself. "Catherine Linton," it replied shiveringly (why did I think of *Linton*? I had read *Earnshaw* twenty times for Linton). "I'm come home: I'd lost my way on the moor!: As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window. Terror made me cruel: and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, "Let me in!" and maintained its tenacious gripe, almost maddening me with fear. "How can I?" I said at length. "Let *me* go, if you want me to let you in!" The fingers relaxed, I snatched mine through the hole, hurriedly piled the books up in a pyramid against it, and stopped my ears to exclude the lamentable prayer. I seemed to keep them closed above a quarter of an hour; yet, the instant I listened again, there was the doleful cry moaning on! "Begone!" I shouted, "I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years." "It is twenty years," mourned the voice: "twenty years. I've been a waif for twenty years!" Thereat began a feeble scratching outside, and the pile of books moved as if thrust forward. I tried to jump up; but could not stir a limb; and so yelled aloud, in a frenzy of fright. (Chap. III).

This kind of effect, the fusion of terror and pathos, is repeated in all the great tragic scenes of the novel, in the delirious speeches of Catherine before her death, the last meeting between the lovers, the final agony of Heathcliff.

This brings us to the ultimate significance of *Wuthering Heights*. I have suggested that the novel should be viewed in a Victorian context and yet, at the same time, I have pointed out that the book does have



its universal aspect. Indeed, without both the specific and the universal contexts, *Wuthering Heights* could not be a great work of art, for without the specific context it could hardly be a novel at all and without the universal context it would certainly not be a tragedy in the true sense of the term. We become aware of the specific and the universal at many points of dramatic and tragic power in the novel. Thus Catherine indicates the cosmic dimension of the passion between herself and Heathcliff by the images she chooses—"fire", "lightning", "the eternal Rocks" (Chap. IX), and so does Heathcliff—"the sea", "an oak" (Chap. XIV). Yet that great love can also be revealed through the most specific details:

"And this [feather]—I should know it among a thousand—it's a lapwing's. Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells, and it felt the rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot: we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dare not come. I made him promise he'd never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn't. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them? Let me look." (Chap. XII)

Now, I want to go one step further and suggest that it is because Emily Bronte has clearly presented a specific Victorian problem within the context of eternity, because she has been able to represent the collision of great impersonal forces through the clash of very real human beings, because she has dramatized the common destiny that stands behind yet hangs upon individual human fates, it is because of these dual considerations that *Wuthering Heights* is a very great work of art. And of visionary art at that, comparable with *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*.

For what Emily Bronte is presenting is the tragedy of modern man with regard to his instinctive life, a tragedy which has reached a serious crisis in the Victorian period. Such a tragedy is concerned with what man has abandoned, must abandon if civilization is to proceed (represented in *Wuthering Heights* by the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship), with what man has exchanged for it in Victorian times (represented by the Catherine-Edgar relationship), and with the compromise which he must achieve (the relationship between the younger Catherine and Hareton)—a compromise which is perhaps being realized in our time. The tragedy, of course, lies in what has been surrendered, must be forever lost through the compromise. Both Freud

and Jung have warned us that there can be no question of turning back, and Freud has described what he believes to be the sad but inevitable fate of modern man in these terms:

One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be "happy" is not included in the plan of "Creation"...If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. ...But perhaps we may also familiarize ourselves with the idea that there are difficulties attaching to the nature of civilization which will not yield to any attempt at reform. ...Thus we may perhaps be forced to become reconciled to the idea that it is quite impossible to adjust the claims of sexual instinct to the demands of civilization; and that in consequence of its cultural development renunciation and suffering, as well as the danger of extinction in the remotest future, cannot be avoided by the human race. This gloomy prognosis rests, it is true, on the single conjecture that the non-satisfaction that goes with civilization is the necessary consequence of certain peculiarities which the sexual instinct has assumed under the pressure of culture. The very incapacity of the sexual instinct to yield complete satisfaction as soon as it submits to the first demands of civilization becomes the source, however, of the noblest cultural achievements which are brought into being by ever more extensive sublimation of its instinctual components. For what motive would men have for putting sexual instinctual forces to other uses if, by any distribution of those forces, they could obtain fully satisfying pleasure? They would never abandon that pleasure and they would never make any further progress. It seems, therefore, that the irreconcilable difference between the demands of the two instincts—the sexual and the egoistic—has made men capable of ever higher achievements.<sup>9</sup>

I personally find this view just a little too gloomy. In my view, it underestimates the degree of pleasure which we in the twentieth century have learned to experience, largely owing to the emancipation of woman. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind two points. First, Freud was after all a product of the nineteenth century. True, he looked upon and helped to lead us towards our twentieth-century promised land but seems, like Moses, to have been forbidden to set foot himself in that land. His anguish, like that of Emily Bronte (and this is partly why I quote him), is a characteristic nineteenth-century anguish. Secondly, in our new-found sense of pleasure, of liberation, we would do well not to over-estimate the degree of our instinctual release. To take only one example, while in certain areas of sexual experience (though only *certain* areas) we are permitted more and more latitude, in other instinctual areas, notably the aggressive, civilization insists that we be allowed less and less. We still tend to forget that man is an animal

trying to raise himself to the level of the angels. Certainly, man can only go forward; he must inherit Thrushcross Grange with young Cathy and Hareton. Yet we cannot help glancing back, with a strange and terrible sadness, to Wuthering Heights, to the wild and abandoned moorlands of our innermost being, where the elder Catherine and Heathcliff walk forever, haunting us with the ghosts of what can never be again, the tragic phantoms of our full and unrestrained instinctive life.

#### Footnotes

1. Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1951), Vol. I. 139-55; Richard Chase, "The Brontës, or Myth Domesticated," *Kenyon Review*, IX (1947), 487-506.
2. W. Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Re-productive Organs* (London, 1857), quoted in Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Angel-Makers* (London, 1958), pp. 100, 283; cf. Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven and London, 1963), p. 353, Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1969), pp. 40-41, 232, 236-237, 288-289.
3. *The Women of England* reached a seventeenth edition in 1842. With regard to the general acceptance of these sentiments about woman by the Victorian middle-class, cf. Arthur Freeling, *The Young Bride's Book; being hints for regulating the conduct of Married Women* (London, 1839), and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Princess* (London, 1847), Part V, lines 437-441; Part VII, lines 301-312; and see also Houghton, op. cit., pp. 348-356.
4. Mary Visick, *The Genesis of Wuthering Heights* (Hong Kong, 1967), pp. 7-8.
5. E. Rigby [Lady Eastlake], review, of *Wuthering Heights* in the *Quarterly Review*, LXXXIV (1848), 175.
6. See Houghton, op. cit, pp. 416-422; Taylor, *The Angel-Makers*, pp. 89-109. 148-168; Taylor, *Sex in History* (London, 1953), pp. 204-224.
7. Cf. Miriam Allott, "Wuthering Heights: The Rejection of Heathcliff?" *Essays in Criticism*, VIII (1958), 27-47, esp. p. 31: "At the novel's end a certain equilibrium has been achieved. It is not, however, as Lord David Cecil says, an inevitable harmony following Heathcliff's posthumous union with his affinity, Catherine, nor the re-establishment of the balance of forces at the beginning of the book when Lintons and Earnshaws existed harmoniously but in separation. It is, in fact, a harmony resulting from a new combination of Earnshaws and Lintons, with Earnshaw energy modified by Linton calm. Heathcliff obsessions are excluded."
8. *Tales of Hoffmann*, ed. Christopher Lazare (New York, 1946), pp. 436-437.
9. Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents" [1930], "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" [1912], *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. James Strachey and others, Vol. XXI (London, 1961), pp 76, 115, Vol. XI (London, 1957, p 190.