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The Problem of "Identity" in Keats's "Negative Capability"

Keats formulated his idea of negative capability in a way that continues to engage our attention. An elusive requirement for success as a poet—a state of mind rather than knowledge or talent—negative capability is still subject to critical discussion both in literary and psychological journals. All commentaries on negative capability search beyond the particular passage of definition in Keats's letter of December 21/27, 1817, to consider what he wrote about the nature of the poet's identity in other letters. One of the passages most often referred to describes the poet as a "chameleon" and suggests that he has no stable identity, but takes on aspects of his surroundings, shifting into an identification with other things and characters at will.¹

A standard reading of Keats looks beyond his writing to argue that Hazlitt's lecture on Shakespeare and Milton is the source for his chameleon poet, and that Hazlitt's ideas help to explain the implications of negative capability. This approach emphasizes Hazlitt's connection between the poet who has "no identity" and the virtue of "disinterestedness", which Hazlitt defined as sympathetic imagination. According to this theory, greatness both in art and in moral action stems from the sympathetic character of the imagination, which involves "losing the sense of 'our personal identity in some object dearer to us than ourselves'".² The theory establishes an optimistic relationship between practical goodness and accomplishment in the arts.

But these theories about identity and disinterestedness which explore Keats's other letters and Hazlitt's essays, have not been satisfactorily related to negative capability. Critics have over-simplified the role of identity in the poetic process, and they are mistaken when they import Hazlitt's relationship between the moral and the aesthetic into Keats. Negative capability has been more obscured by the connection with disinterestedness than illuminated by it.

Some further exploration of Keats's thought is needed, then, to specify what qualities of mind he saw as distinguishing the poet from

other men. Locke's work on identity can be studied as the direct philosophical context for Keats on the subject; and Keats's poetry can be read as a dramatic struggle for identity.

I

The first stage in reassessing Keats on identity is to examine his use of Hazlitt's disinterestedness, which has often been connected with identity; and to see that while "identity" does not belong to Keats's discussion of imaginative men, "disinterestedness" belongs primarily to his discussion of the unimaginative.

Keats finished *Endymion* during the winter of 1817-1818, and was dissatisfied with it; he wanted a point of view very different from that self-involved "maudlin interval" between boyhood and maturity of which he spoke in the preface.³ Thus, he was impressed for a time with Hazlitt's outward-directed sympathetic imagination, or "disinterestedness", as the antidote to this self-involvement. The imagination's leap beyond the self to a sympathetic understanding of others was the substance of Hazlitt's original "discovery" made in the 1790's and expounded in the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, in opposition to the Hobbesian school of mechanical association and invariable self-interest. Hazlitt maintained that man's "nature is originally and essentially disinterested"; he believed that with the development of good habits our sense of the good of others could be just as warm and vivid as the idea of our own good.⁴

In making one of the earliest connections between Hazlitt and Keats, Finney wrote:

Keats possessed a copy of Hazlitt's essay; and he accepted Hazlitt's thesis that men have disinterested as well as selfish natural impulses. From this time on he judged his friends by the criterion of disinterestedness.⁵

Keats did use the idea of disinterestedness several times to express a quality he deeply appreciated in those he loved. He used it in relation to his close friend Bailey, and his sister-in-law, Georgiana, and he felt its absence in other friends. However, before extending the idea of disinterestedness into the realm of the artistic imagination, we must examine how Keats uses the term in relation to these two friends. Keats felt a sharp division between the attributes of disinterestedness and artistic genius:

I said if there were three things superior in the modern world, they were "the Excursion," "Haydon's pictures" & "Hazlitt's depth of Taste" So I do believe—Not thus speaking with any poor vanity that works of

genius were the first things in this world. No! for that sort of probity & disinterestedness which such men as Bailey possess, does hold and grasp the tip top of any spiritual honours, that can be paid to anything in this world ... (I, 204-205)

The personal qualities of his friend Bailey, who was studying to become a clergyman, were deserving of the highest spiritual honours, but not of the sort responsible for producing *The Excursion*. The gulf between an imaginative genius and a disinterested heart was an issue that engaged Keats's attention again and again:

I had know(n) my sister-in-law some time before she was my Sister and was very fond of her. I like her better and better—she is the most disinterested woman I ever knew—that is to say she does beyond degree in it—To see an entirely disinterested Girl quite happy is the most pleasant and extraordinary thing in the world—it depends upon a thousand Circumstances—on my word 'tis extraordinary. Women must want imagination and they may thank God for it—and so m(a)y we that a delicate being can feel happy without any sense of crime. (I, 293)

Keats believed that "an entirely disinterested Girl" who is "quite happy", "must want imagination." Imagination and disinterestedness are quite distinct. Keats's use of the word "disinterestedness" seems to be always associated with the world of active benevolence rather than with art. (It is worth noting here that the pure of heart, or "entirely disinterestedness", want not only imagination but also a sense of "crime." This implicit connection between guilt and imagination is made again in a passage on identity, and also in *Endymion*.)

The best introduction to the distinction is a letter Keats wrote to Bailey a few weeks before the first mention of "disinterestedness." Keats was exploring the lack of "character" in "Men of Genius."

As soon as I had know Haydon three days I had got enough of his character not to have been surprised at such a Letter as he has hurt you with. Nor when I knew it was it a principle with me to drop his acquaintance although with you it would have been an imperious feeling. I wish you knew all I think about Genius and the Heart . . . Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the mass of neutral intellect—but they have not any individuality, any determined Character. (I, 184; italics added)

Keats's critics have looked at this passage in connection with the chameleon poet who has no self; and they have always regarded it as descriptive of a positive attribute. However, in the phrases which I have omitted, Keats emphasizes that his new thought was humbling. He introduces his comments on "Men on Genius" by saying, "one thing that has pressed upon me lately and increased my Humility and capability of submission . . . is this truth . . . , men of Genius have not

any individuality, any determined character." His new thought concerns the failure to sympathize with others as a result of concentration on "abstraction;" of art. Through a confession about his own cold "abstraction" Keats tried to get Bailey to forgive Haydon, who suffered from the same artist's lack of "character":

The first thing that strikes me on hea(r)ing a Misfortune having befallen another is this. 'Well it cannot be helped.—he will have the pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit, and I beg now my dear Bailey that hereafter should you observe anything cold in me not to put it to the account of heartlessness but abstraction—for I assure you I sometimes feel not the influence of a Passion or Affection during a whole week. . . . (I, 186)

This passage is a prologue to Keats's late letter to Shelley in which he says that artists "must have 'self-concentration' selfishness perhaps" (II-322-323).

In *Hyperion*, as in his letters, Keats explored a conflict between the energies needed for art and those needed for moral disinterestedness or sympathy in the conduct of life. When the poet enters the poem in *The Fall of Hyperion* and asks Moneta why there are no benefactors to humanity at the shrine she replies,

. . . They are no dreamers weak,
 'They seek no wonder but the human face;
 'No music but a happy-noted voice—
 'They come not here, they have no thought to come—
 'And thou art here for thou art less than they⁶

Keats had written earlier that works of genius were not the first things in the world, but rather "that sort of probity & disinterestedness which such men as Bailey possess." Disinterestedness as a social virtue, belongs in Keats's thought to the benefactors, not to the poet-dreamers. This human sympathy, valuable though it be, is not, in Keats's view, the peculiar virtue of the poet. The problem of identity provides a much richer set of ideas to explore in trying to illuminate negative capability.

II

Keats's passages on his lack of identity are much more complex than the single most often quoted passage of the letters suggest.

As to the poetical Character . . . it has no self— it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair. . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. (I, 386-387)

In the same letter to Richard Woodhouse (October 27, 1818), Keats speaks of his loss of identity with a profound sense of uneasiness: "the identity of everyone in the room begins to so press upon me that, I am in a little time annihilated." In the absence of a strong "character", Keats sometimes felt frightening psychic pressures. Later in the letters, he writes again of the fearful, almost guilty, sense which accompanied the loss of identity:

. . . but to have nothing to do, and to be surrounded by unpleasant human identities; who press upon one just enough to prevent one getting into a lazy position; and not enough to interest or rouse one; is a capital punishment of a capital crime . . . (II, 77)

(This vague "crime" which Keats spoke of in relation to an endangered identity is associated with both women and poetry in another passage, and will be discussed more fully in looking at the problem of identity in *Endymion*.) The discomfort and guilt that Keats describes with his lost sense of identity is only a temporary state of feeling, for a witty regaining of self-confidence often follows Keats's accounts of his experiences of disintegration. In the Woodhouse letter, for instance, (i.e., the "chameleon Poet" letter) after confessing that his opinions did not grow out of his "identical nature" and could not be trusted, Keats concludes: "I am sure however that this next sentence is from *myself*. I feel your anxiety, good opinion and friendliness in the highest degree, and am Yours most sincerely John Keats" (I, 388; italics added). Keats was not overwhelmed with a loss of identity; for after expressing his fear, he states clearly that for the purposes of friendship he can speak from his *self*, certain to his identity in rendering thanks.

If one is looking for a psychologist whose work on identity was known to Keats and who would understand what he was talking about in his letter, Locke is a far better candidate than Hazlitt. In a footnote to the "vale of Soul-making" letter (II, 102-103), Rollins notes that Keats had been reading Locke. Lectures on Locke were given in London by Hazlitt and Coleridge while Keats was living there, and he may have begun reading Locke in preparation for those lectures. Locke believed that the identity of a person depends only on unity of consciousness. Unity of consciousness alone makes the self and consists in a person's ability to be aware of thoughts, feelings, volitions, actions as they occur, and to be able, subsequently, to recall that original consciousness and recognize it as the same consciousness that now recalls it. This is the sequence that is the root of personal identity for Locke.⁷ But Locke was bothered by certain psychological anomalies, and he kept questioning the notion of one consciousness in one

person. In his chapter, "Of identity and diversity," Locke admits the possibility of a second consciousness present in sleep or in dreaming:

. . . not reflecting on our past selves, being intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with that consciousness which remarks our waking thoughts . . . doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e., the same substance, or no.⁸

Later in the chapter Locke writes:

Could we suppose two distinct and incommunicable consciousnesses acting the same body, the one constantly by day, the other by night . . . I ask . . . whether the *day-* and the *night-man* would not be two as distinct persons as *Socrates* and *Plato*?⁹

While Locke asks this question rhetorically, and while his philosophical conclusion remains constant, that there is only one consciousness in one person, Keats takes up the question as a real one. Keats's questions concerning his own identity, and also that of the poet-dreamer, thus find a context in Locke's work, and especially in this speculation on the day- and night-man. When Keats wonders whether he speaks from his "identical nature," he is questioning the unity of his consciousness. When he fears that in "cogitating on the Characters of saturn and Ops" (I, 387) he cannot be trusted to speak from his self, he wonders about the *day-* and the *night-man*", about his identity as friend and his multiple consciousness as poet-dreamer.

In this same chapter on identity, after referring to an acquaintance (of high post) who believed that he possessed the soul of Socrates, Locke makes a challenge to anyone who can reflect upon himself and discovers he has an immaterial spirit, or soul, which thinks:

. . . let him also suppose it to be the same soul that was in *Nestor* or *Thersites* at the siege of *Troy* . . . but he now having no consciousness of any of the actions either of *Nestor* or *Thersites*, does or can he conceive himself the same person with either of them?

Locke concludes, "But let him once find himself conscious of any of the actions of *Nestor*, he then finds himself the same person with *Nestor*."¹⁰ Keats, in a full identification with the characters of his imagination almost felt conscious of their actions, and according to Locke's definition, which he knew, this endangered his identity. Speaking of his nature as a poet, in a passage where the identification with figures at the siege of Troy brings him close even in detail to Locke's argument, Keats says,

According to my state of mind I am with Achilles shouting in the trenches or with Theocritus in the Vales of Sicily. Or I throw my whole being into Troilus and repeating those lines, 'I wander, like a lost soul upon the stygian Banks . . .' (I, 404)

The passage is about loss of identity in two respects, both as Keats describes his complete identification with mythological figures and as he expresses the melancholy *feeling* of lost identity, "I wander, like a lost soul upon the stygian Banks." Keats goes on to say, "These things combined with the opinion I have of the generality of women . . . form a barrier against Matrimony." Again, Keats suggests that the weakness in personal identity which allows his life of imagination disables him for a life of affection in the real world.

Keats's doubts about his own identity became intertwined with doubts about the value of imagination, and became a central subject in his odes. When we look into Keats's expressions of conflict between imagination and reality we can see the roots of this conflict in the problem of identity. Keats wrote about the sunset, the sparrow, the mythological figure as if he had lost his identity in the object. He experienced these identifications sometimes with a sense of discovery and sometimes with fear or irritability. Eventually, Keats began to see that his identity would not be maddened by his imagination and could be strengthened by it. He realized, in other words, "that a not inconsiderable increase in psychical efficiency" can result "from a disposition which in itself is perilous." In the four years we know Keats as a letter writer and a poet, we can see the development of his capacity for retaining a sense of identity even when seized by powerful or seductive visions. This is the development—the turning of a weakness into a strength, both as artist and as man—that accounts for many apparent contradictions in Keats's thought. The language of negative capability has been difficult because it suggests a puzzling oxymoron—a negative and a positive. The figure presents two aspects of a dual process, the first part of which, in its partial renunciation of control, can be felt as a negative, while the second, or alternating, state recreates and is felt as a capability. The creative process in some of its operations posed dangers for Keats's identity. But by the spring of 1819, the period of the great odes, there appears a new strength in the second aspect of negative capability—a new realism and a new mastery of the imagination.

III

The dramatic contents of *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and the *Ode to a Nightingale* present the working out poetically of

complex problems of aesthetics and identity which we have been studying in the letters.

For example, in both *Endymion* and *Hyperion*, the cost of losing identity is inadequately compensated for—in the one case, by the arbitrary pulling together of Endymion's divided soul, and in the other, by the detached stoicism and progressivism of Oceanus. The negative aspect of the creative process, the dissolution of identity, dominates the drama, and the compensation seems insufficient. The poems can be compared, then, for the different ways in which a loss of identity is triggered, and the different ways in which a newly formed identity fails to convince us of its coherence and its depth.

In *Endymion*, the protagonist's loss of identity is triggered by a quest for immortal love which became necessary to his soul, while it remained unattainable because of his mortal nature. The conflict culminates in the fourth book, where the struggle between moral limitations and immortal longings becomes incarnated in the irreconcilable loves for the Indian maid of the earth and the goddess of the moon. As the shadow of the golden haired Phoebe melts away weeping because of his love for the dark haired Indian maid, Endymion swears he has no "daedale heart and asks, "Is there nought for me/upon the borne of bliss but misery?"

At one point Endymion is given a vision of Diana and the feast of the gods; he awakes to find the vision real, and doubts the integrity of his own soul.

... What is this soul then? Whence
Came it? It does not seem my own, and
I have no self-passion or identity.
Some fearful end must be: where, where is it?
By Nemesis I see my spirit flit
Alone about the dark¹²

All this takes place in the sky, mounted on the dark, winged horses of the visionary imagination. The loss and fear are explicit, "I have no self-passion or identity". When Endymion returns to earth after his vision, and his loss of identity, he wishes never more to be "by Phantoms duped". He now believes that in his visions he has "clung to nothing, lov'd a nothing, nothing seen/Or felt but a great dream!"

... O I have been
Presumptuous against love, against the sky,
Against all elements, against the tie
Of mortals each to each¹³

Endymion's guilt about his presumption is an important element in the drama. The visionary imagination that destroyed Endymion's peace is inextricably connected with a sense of crime, of torn loyalties. The presence of a Nemesis that demands the punishment of solitude for the breaking of a loyalty to the goddess, is at the heart of the lost identity in *Endymion*.

In the tormenting struggle with immortal longings, Endymion finds a momentary peace and vows to give up the visions which have dissolved his identity:

... Caverns lone farewell!
 And air of visions, and the monstrous swell
 Of visionary seas! No more
 Shall airy voices cheat me to the shore
 Of tangled wonder, breathless and aghast.¹⁴

But despite this vow to give up "The monstrous/Swell of visionary seas," the protagonist does not in the end have to give up his vision of possessing the "Queen-moon on her throne." For Keats brings her to earth, makes her one with the maiden and returns them to the air of visions. The major aesthetic problem with the narrative structure of *Endymion* lies in the arbitrariness of this resolution, its unearned suddenness. The emotional failure of the protagonist to establish a new identity by accepting either one loyalty or the other results in an artistic failure to create a dramatically prepared and coherent resolution.

In *Hyperion* too, the negative experience of lost identity triggers the tragic feeling and dramatic action of the poem. *Hyperion's* main theme, "the struggle of spiritual growth itself,"¹⁵ is concretized in the need for a new identity after the fall from power. Saturn's experience of being divided from his "strong identity", from his "real self"¹⁶ is the central experience of all the the gods in Keats's epic. Many readings of *Hyperion* concentrate on Oceanus's speech of stoic acceptance as the evidence of a new maturity in Keats's vision, of a realism about the inevitable successions of history.¹² The expression of sorrow, loss, fear and rage which make up all the other voices and moods in the epic are somehow viewed as aberrant. This over-emphasis of Oceanus's stoicism obscures the fact that the struggle with identity is experienced by all the gods except Oceanus and is the expression of a drama which is at the heart of Keats's nature and which was essential to the conflict of *Endymion* as well. The expressions of rage in Enceladus, of grief in Saturn, of horror in Hyperion, are not digressions from the progress towards resolution in the poem, but the large symbolical situations which are the substance of the poem's drama—the situations of threa-

tened identities. What can be said about the centrality of Oceanus's acceptance is that without a resting place, the epic struggle could not be tolerated by the imagination. To see the theme of the poem simply as "progress" is to view the drama of the fallen and falling gods as subservient to the single stoic message of Oceanus. But the epic of the suffering gods, struggling with their lost identities, remains linked with sadness and turmoil in Keats's work, rather than with triumph. The poem ends after the full depiction of the circumstances of the fall, not with the articulated vision of a resolved and triumphant Apollo.

The struggles of the protagonists in *Endymion* and *Hyperion* are simultaneously struggles with identity and with the passions of love and power. The connection between the aesthetics of Keats's letters and the psychological dramas of his poetry is even more explicit in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* and in the *Ode to a Nightingale*. For in these poems, the protagonists are poets, and the artistic process is the stated subject of the drama.

In the revised version of *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, the poet enters the poem and the process of imagination is depicted as guided by the goddess of memory, Moneta. (In the original *Hyperion*, the drama is presented as an omniscient epic narration, with no framework describing poetic process.) The opening of *The Fall* has been as earnestly praised for its poetry as it has been queried for its meaning. The conflict of the epic is presented as a "dream" in the poet's mind. With the psychological process of dreaming as the mode of invention, the poem announces its theme as one of spiritual struggle. In the new opening, which presents the self-searchings of the poet prior to vision, Keats embodied his perception that the imagination depended not on selflessness, but on "self-concentration" as he puts it in the letter to Shelley (II, 322-323). This "self-concentration" is not self-indulgence, for the state can border on the abyss of self-annihilation (as madness) before it results in spiritual growth. The depiction of the poet's arrival at the shrine of memory and of his struggle with self-doubt concerning his identity as poet-dreamer is a dramatization of negative capability.

One critical opinion holds that in the opening passages of *The Fall of Hyperion*, the imaginative men include both the poets and the benefactors, who are "one" in their feeling of misery for the world: "the imaginative men are divided into those like Keats, who dream, and those who act for immediate human good."¹⁸ This view represents the tenacious conclusion that Keats joined the imagination with benevolence. But we have seen that this is not the case in the letters, and *The Fall* is consistent with them. The poet of *The Fall* speaks of those who

possibility that the process of imagination, dangerous in itself, will effect a stronger identity (a detached view of misery). In understanding the dual potentiality of an initially weak identity, we can see how groupings at first divided in the poem—poet-dreamers and “those who labour for mortal good”—could be reunited in the true poet. The poet-narrator of *The Fall* was to gain an emotional detachment from the god’s misery, like that the benevolent hold in relation to the world. In the terms of the poem, he must be like the gods in endurance. But the change in identity from mortal to god was not possible as a resolution for the identity struggle created by the visionary imagination. The metamorphosis was not fully accomplished for Apollo in *Hyperion*, and the revised poem remains unfinished. The principle for the poet’s detachment could not be an identification with immortality.

In the dramatic presentation of the poet engaged in the creative process which makes up the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion*, the wavering, the questioning, the confused self-doubts, are essential; the self-accusations of frivolity, of escapism, of fever, are presented as the necessary precedent to the visionary imagination. Negative capability, the capability of remaining in “doubts, Mysteries uncertainties” has been dramatized in the vacillation between intense self-doubt and partial reassurance which is the prelude to the vision of *The Fall*. But while the drama of doubt unleashes the vision, the resolution through an identification with an immortal, rather than with a mortal, subject is insufficient.

Do you see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or Intelligence sucks its identity . . . (II, 102-103)

In the spring of 1819, when Keats was reconsidering the relation of the visionary imagination to identity, he wrote the *Ode to a Nightingale*. After the visionary journey inspired by the identification with the nightingale, the poet returns to the fate of mortal men on earth. The concentration on “self” in the ode’s ending is not self absorption. The acceptance of the “sole self” is the acceptance of mortal identity, and allows the regaining of detachment, wit and speculation in the final stanza of the ode. The kind of reading which makes a bleak ending for the poem involves the same sentimental falsification that occurs in the criticism of disinterestedness. The “forlorn” feeling of the conclusion is a hard won realism.

In the letters, Keats describes the poet’s wavering identity both as profoundly uncomfortable and as potentially creative. In the poems,

Keats's protagonists lose their identities to be overwhelmed by visions and passions. The concern with identity in Keats's protagonists can be read as a dramatic presentation of emotions the poet feels in the process of artistic creation. Such mythic elaborations of lost identity suggest that the topic of threatened identity is connected trebly to negative capability: the endangered identity provides the impulse to create; the flexible identity is the ground for successful creativity; and the feelings of a temporarily lost identity, its ecstasy and its horror, comprise the subject on which the creative impulse is focussed. An exploration of Keats on identity suggests that negative capability did not become less important to Keats at the end of his career, but even more important. For the most complex dramatization of negative capability—the description of the poet's agonizing struggle with identity in the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*—is the last great passage of poetry he composed.

NOTES

1. *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, pp. 386-387. All further references to the letters will be made by volume and page number to this edition.
2. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 258-259.
3. *Keats: Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 390.
4. William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), I, pp. 1049.
5. Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keat's Poetry* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 222.
6. *Keats: Poetical Works*, p. 407.
7. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent, 1961), pp. 280-282.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 284, 285.
11. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-1974) VII, p. 238.
12. *Keats: Poetical Works*, p. 144.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (London: Mercury, 1963), p. 218.
16. *Keats: Poetical Works*, p. 223.
17. cf. Aileen Ward, *John Keats*, pp. 218-219
18. John Middleton Murry, *Keats* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), p. 245.
19. *Keats: Poetical Works*, p. 407.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413.