Wordsworth's Moonlight-Poetry and the Sense of the "Uncanny"

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Ι

Conspicuous among those who have emphasized in Wordsworth the tension between Nature and Imagination is Geoffrey Hartman, who has argued that one habitual Wordsworthian response is to shy away from "an 'apocalyptic' position" since "he does not want to find imagination in violation of man or nature." Wordsworth's hope, then, is "that the imagination can be domesticated, that nature can satisfy a mind which seeks, or used to seek, the supernatural."

The attraction of Wordsworth to the supernatural is, nonetheless, potent in an early phase of his career; and there are a number of texts from the Alfoxden period (1798) which reveal not simply this attraction, but the ambivalence of feeling aroused by it. Since, however, Wordsworth's supernatural is deliberately muted by his strong grasp of the actual, we need a more acceptable term to describe a poetry which mediates between the extremes of natural and supernatural. I would propose, for convenience, that we speak of Wordsworth's poetry of the preternatural; and I would argue further that this preternatural quality is most frequently evidenced in a consistent imagery of moonlight.2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, in a famous passage in The Scarlet Letter, may help us further to define the quality of this poetry of the preternatural which exists in an intermediary moonlit world. In the preamble of "The Custom-House," Hawthorne presents himself seated in a moonlit parlour, "striving to picture imaginary scenes. . . . " He continues:

If the imaginative faculty refused to act at such an hour, it might well be deemed a hopeless case. Moonlight...—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility,—is a medium the most suitable for a romancewriter to get acquainted with his illusive guests....[W]hatever...has been used or played with, during the day, is now invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness, though still as vividly present as by daylight. Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.³

Hawthorne's comfortable tone suggests that the peculiar effects brought about by what he subsequently calls "magic moonshine" are not, finally, disturbing. In the case of Wordsworth's moonlight poems, the ambivalence of attitude can create a curious tonality, evoking the eerie and the uncanny. This is not necessarily, of course, always the case with Wordsworth: and there are even instances of a poetry of moonlight which rejoices in the vivid strangeness of an alien context and the imaginative possibilities it provides. The three major texts for consideration here are "The Idiot Boy," Peter Bell, and the striking sequence of the discharged soldier at the end of Book IV of The Prelude. All three (at least in terms of their initial conception) belong to the early part of 1798. For the sake of convenience, these might be arranged in a scale of ascending eerieness or imaginative disturbance. We may begin with "The Idiot Boy" and proceed, finally, to the soldier-episode.

Initially we may note that, like *Peter Bell*, "The Idiot Boy" was in part conceived as a riposte to poetry of the supernatural: in this case, that of the German poet, Bürger. Nonetheless, though the basis of Wordsworth's poem is firmly naturalistic, his idiot boy, travelling in solitude through the strange moonlit landscape, is inevitably touched by an extra-human abnormality. Thus the poet at one point entertains the possibility that:

still and mute, in wonder lost, All silent as a horseman-ghost, He travels slowly down the vale. (ll. 324-26) He becomes akin to those of whom "we in romances read" (l. 355), though the poet adds (l. 369) that he is no goblin or ghost.

One function of the moonlight is to evoke a stillness that suggests transcendence. The association of moonlight with repose is perhaps a natural and instinctive one; it is, in any case, apparent in a letter Wordsworth wrote to Sir George Beaumont in the summer of 1804: "Our own valley... was last night by the light of the full moon, and in the perfect stillness of the Lake a scene of loveliness and repose as affecting as was ever beheld by the eye of man." In "The Idiot Boy" itself, one of the recurrent motifs is the contrast between human agitation and the realm of transcendent stillness associated with the moon. The agitation is evident, for the most part, not only in the anxieties of Johnny's mother, but in her joy at his restoration:

She is uneasy everywhere; Her limbs are all alive with joy. (ll. 390-91)

Johnny's privilege, gained through his mental abnormality (which allows him to transcend human agitation) is to be subsumed into this pure tranquility:

The Moon that shines above his head Is not more still and mute than he. (ll. 80-81)

So, too, when Johnny is finally discovered, he is found in a statuesque pose that contrasts with the sound and movement of the nearby waterfall:

Who's yon, that near the waterfall, Which thunders down with headlong force, Beneath the moon, yet shining fair, As careless as if nothing were, Sits upright on a feeding horse? (Il. 347-51)

Once again, the presiding moon effects a symbiosis between her own transcendent stillness and Johnny's immobility. That the idiot boy's mental abnormality might indeed be directly linked with transcendent experience is further suggested in an explicit (but teasingly brief) comment by Wordsworth on the poem in a letter of June 7, 1802. "I have often applied to Idiots," he writes,

"in my own mind, that sublime expression of scripture that, 'their life is hidden with God'."

But what, perhaps, is even more striking is not that the idiot boy is in touch with the divine (this statement, after all, though illuminating, occurs some years after the poem's composition); it is rather that, thoroughly removed as he is from that human level of existence marked by natural agitation, he is totally at home in the non-human context in which his adventures befall him. In an earlier work like The Borderers, insanity may be the outcome or the index of an epistemological tension between the imagination and an alien world.7 Part of the real significance of "The Idiot Boy" may lie in the fact that there the position is joyously reversed. In the case of Johnny, insanity is not an index of epistemological tension; it is a means of by-passing that tension. Because of his mental state, the boy is simply not aware of the strangeness of his environment; unafflicted by its potentially alien nature, he is free to indulge spontaneously and joyously in what is presented to him.

Wordsworth's particular fondness for the poem is well-known. In the Fenwick note, he tells us that "I never wrote anything with so much glee." And in the letter of 1802 already referred to, he informs us that "I wrote the poem with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure." The idiot boy is thoroughly at home in the strangeness of the moonlit world which, we may feel, is continuous with his own strange inner life. What I would suggest is that the joy of the poem (and the "glee" of the poet) may derive primarily from this triumphant sense of being at-home-with-otherness. That disturbing otherness, so often manifest in the moonlit world, poses no problem for the mock-heroic Johnny, for whom moon and owlet's cry are readily assimilated to the ordinary and the every-day:

"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, And the sun did shine so cold!" (ll. 450-51)

If Frederick Garber is correct in finding in Wordsworth a "manifold terror of otherness," then the great appeal of "The Idiot

Boy" may lie in Johnny's total and triumphant imperturbability in the face of it.9

More typically, however, the moonlight world of the preternatural tends to carry with it some degree of imaginative disturbance. In the case of *Peter Bell*, the poet remains confidently in control of his preternatural effects, knowing that they do, indeed, differ from the supernatural; yet there are frequent local instances of the kind of disturbance this moonlit world can engender. The moon figures prominently both in the published version of 1819 and in the MS. variants. In 1819, the moon looks "uneasy" (l. 483), may (the poet inaccurately surmises in his attempt to explain Peter's fear at what he sees in the river) be casting a "distorted face" on the water's surface (l. 501), and vividly highlights Peter's panicky state:

His hat is up — and every hair Bristles and whitens in the moon! (ll. 524-25)

Subsequently, Peter espies drops of blood in the moonlight:

A stain — as of a drop of blood By moonlight made more faint and wan... (ll. 721-22)

The blood, however, is merely that of the otherwise sturdy Ass, wounded earlier by Peter's blows. In general, the published version remains comfortably comic: 10 it is really in certain MS. passages that the curious tonality we are seeking emerges. Thus, towards the end of Part Second, one MS. has this additional description of Peter:

For Peter Bell he looks I vow
With his dull face of ashy white
Just like a creature that pertains
To some strange world of silent pains
A creature of a moonlight night.... (PW, II, 366)

The sense of strangeness is further emphasized in another MS. passage, not included in the final version, which describes Ass and rider:

And while together now they go Across the open moonlight down,

To say the truth, they seem a pair Come from some region of the air, Some unknown region of their own.... (PW, II, 364)

It is when the moonlight threatens to usher in a "strange world" or "unknown region" that we discern an alien presence that disturbs the even temper of the poem.

Peter Bell is one of the finest examples of Wordsworth's ability to exploit a "border" situation between natural and supernatural. It is, indeed, an instinctive habit of Wordsworth's imagination to make the most of these intermediary situations. The clearest instance is probably that found in a lengthy passage in an MS. that relates to Book XIII of The Prelude: it is, once more, a situation in which moonlight contributes its effects. The poet recalls how he and a companion came one evening upon a horse:

that stood
Alone upon a little breast of ground
With a clear silver moonlight sky behind,
With one leg from the ground the creature stood
Insensible and still, — breath, motion gone,
Hairs, colour, all but shape and substance gone,
Mane, ears, and tail, as lifeless as the trunk
That had no stir of breath; we paused awhile
In pleasure of the sight, and left him there
With all his functions silently sealed up,
Like an amphibious work of Nature's hand,
A Borderer dwelling betwixt life and death,
A living Statue or a statued Life.

(Prelude, p. 624, ll. 35-47)

The sight here described provokes "pleasure," and there is little hint of the uncanny. Yet the balance between the familiar and the utterly strange is a precarious one; and there is always the possibility that the figure depicted may recede into the alien modality of the supernatural. One simple and rather innocent version of this kind of writing occurs incidentally in *The Borderers*: the Beggar Woman in Act I, commenting on Herbert, describes him as:

Lank as a ghost and tall, his shoulders bent, And long beard white with age. . . . (ll. 461-62)

This brief passage acquires retrospectively a greater resonance when we consult later descriptions in the "moonlight" poems of 1798. The key-words are "Lank" and "ghost": anyone familiar with certain passages in Peter Bell and the soldier-episode will recognize a similarity in the vocabulary of gauntness and the ghastly (the soldier, in addition, is also like Herbert "of stature tall, / A foot above man's common measure tall . . . " [Prelude, IV, 405-06]). The peculiar effects in the moonlight-poems seem to be dependent on certain highly-charged images. In Peter Bell, it is the humble Ass who carries something of this charge: his sides are "lank," and Peter acknowledges "How gaunt the Creature is — how lean / And sharp his staring bones!" (ll. 442, 449-50). The soldier is "lank," "lean," "meagre"; his arm "lean and wasted" (Prelude, IV, 407-08, 437). In both cases, also, the moon's preternatural light is reflected on the immediate natural level. There is some degree of tonal affinity between the Ass's "shining hazel eye" (Peter Bell, 1. 435; and in an M.S. passage occurring shortly after, this is heightened to "large and shining eye"), and the village-windows in the soldier-episode which shone to the moon "with a yellow glitter" (Prelude, IV, 452-53).

In the case of *Peter Bell*, Wordsworth's conscious intention is to push the natural as far as he can in the direction of the supernatural: the poet, as I have earlier argued, remains the arbiter of the poem's tone. With the soldier-episode, the case is rather different: and (especially in the earlier version found in the 1805 *Prelude*) the effect is rather of a disturbing irruption of the preternatural onto a quiet natural scene. At the beginning of the sequence, all is "peace and solitude":

Thus did I steal along that silent road, My body from the stillness drinking in A restoration like the calm of sleep....

(IV, 389, 385-87)

The even tenor is only momentarily disturbed by the reference to "the road's watery surface" which "glitter'd in the moon" (ll. 371-72). On this peaceful natural scene the "uncouth shape" of

the soldier (1. 402) acts as an intrusion. The poet is explicit as to the immediate effect on his feelings:

> Long time Did I peruse him with a mingled sense Of fear and sorrow. (ll. 419-21)

The malaise is maintained in the subsequent reference to the "murmuring sounds" that issue from the figure, "as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought..." (ll. 421-23). The rest of the passage might be generally described in terms of the poet's attempts to normalize and domesticate this embodied strangeness. The strange figure's narrative ("a Soldier's tale") serves to provide him with a rudimentary (and normal) identity (ll. 445-49); and the soldier is, literally, "domesticated" when he is finally ushered into a cottage (ll. 496-500). Nonetheless, the figure still resists in his moonlit strangeness the full process of assimilation. Much depends on the recurrence of the term "ghastly":

> his mouth Shew'd ghastly in the moonlight . . .

> > I beheld

With ill-suppress'd astonishment his tall And ghastly figure moving at my side . . .

With the same ghastly mildness in his look He said, "my trust is in the God of Heaven. . . . " (11. 410-11, 466-68, 493-94)

Gaunt, tall, ghastly and utterly strange, the soldier remains outside the world of familiar objects. Wordsworth's desire, in Hartman's phrase, not to find "imagination in violation of man or nature," is more urgent in this episode than in Peter Bell. The desire is counteracted by the powerful, centripetal magnetism of the eerie, the uncanny; and the extraordinary tonal tension in the poetry is the result.11 In its narrative movement the passage achieves adequate resolution when the poet is relieved of the burden of responsibility for the soldier, and, having left him at the cottage, "sought with quiet heart my distant home" (1. 504). This last line, however (along with the line and a half preceding), was a later addition: a fact which suggests that the resolution was achieved only some time after the original experience.

II

Of recent commentators, Frederick Garber has been most consistent in his emphasis on Wordsworth's "terror of otherness," his awareness of "the unconquerable foreignness of that which is thickly out there." For Wordsworth, the non-human "remains in some part always distant and — because it is strange and permanently so — always potentially frightening." A number of the "spots of time" passages in *The Prelude* might be cited in illustration: one thinks, for example, of the boat-stealing episode in Book I, where, in the aftermath, the boy's brain "Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense / Of unknown modes of being," so that "familiar shapes / Of hourly objects" are banished from his mind, and his troubled imagination is instead peopled by "huge and mighty Forms that do not live / Like living men . . . " (I, 418-20, 422-23, 425-26).

Wordsworth, however, paradoxically finds in such moments a source of strength: if the boy's sense of normality is jeopardized, the effect is not finally traumatic, but positively releases hitherto unknown imaginative powers. Wordsworth's tendency to find the world alien to his imagination, then, is not simply a negative and modernistic one; for he finds revelation in its strangeness. Modern man's situation in the face of the non-human universe is perhaps akin to his situation vis-à-vis an unknown God: "Where once man's face before God could be described by Rudolf Otto as that of awe before the numen, it has now become anxiety (angst) before the wholly unknown." Wordsworth, in his solitary encounters with the natural world, is often experiencing a feeling that is mid-way between these extremes, awe (in a positive, quasi-religious sense) blending inextricably with the real tension of fear.

The balance between the extremes, however, is again precarious. There are, therefore, those moments in the history of Wordsworth's imagination when the feeling of the unknown and the foreign is predominant, and the world's un-canniness—etymologically related to the "un-known"—powerfully intimates the impossibility of man's feeling at home in a context that is so alien. Indeed, if we follow the hint of Martin Heidegger, the

German equivalent of the word "uncanny" can lead us to a direct awareness of man's sense of not-being-at-home in the world. Heidegger is discussing anxiety as a distinctive way in which the nature of Dasein (man's being) is disclosed. "In anxiety," he notes, "one feels 'uncanny' [unheimlich]." Exploiting the etymology of the German word — "unhomelike" — Heidegger proceeds to define uncanniness as "not-being-at-home." It is the function of anxiety to urge man out of his absorption in the security of "average everydayness": with the onset of anxiety, everyday familiarity collapses. Man then "enters into the existential 'mode' of the 'not-at-home'. Nothing else is meant by our talk about 'uncanniness'." 14

One of the finest instances of Wordsworth's direct encounter with the uncanny is the famous gibbet-episode in Book XI of *The Prelude*. A mere child, Wordsworth goes riding with a servant towards the hills. Before long, "some mischance" separates him from his "encourager and guide" (ll. 280-86). The child's initial reaction to the possibility that he is lost is "fear" (l. 286); the fear is further compounded when he reaches a spot

where in former times A Murderer had been hung in iron chains. (ll. 289-90)

"Faltering, and ignorant where I was" (l. 300), the child's state is close to that of panic. Immediately, he tells us:

I left the spot
And, reascending the bare Common, saw
A naked Pool that lay beneath the hills,
The Beacon on the summit, and more near,
A girl who bore a Pitcher on her head
And seem'd with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight; but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I look'd all round for my lost guide,
Did at that time invest the naked Pool,
The Beacon on the lonely Eminence,
The Woman, and her garments vex'd and toss'd
By the strong wind. (ll. 302-16)

The gradual growth of fear in the boy is, as we have seen, psychologically feasible. It remains, nonetheless, difficult if not impossible to say whence precisely the child's radical sense of insecurity springs. The implicit fear seems to be that the manifest phenomena will suddenly yield to the irruption of some unforeseeable and indeterminately "other" reality. We should perhaps lay especial stress (admittedly taking the phrase out of context) on "unknown to man." That which is unknown is also that which is non-human. The woman who "seem'd with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind" epitomizes the precarious state of the human and the normal in the abrupt presence of the non-human. The wind may embody the sense of a threatening force, and, as in Ted Hughes' poem, the primitive fear may be that the landscape may "bang and vanish with a flap" ("Wind," l. 14). Hartman's term apocalypse, in the strict sense of revelation, seems particularly apt: the unrevealed, the inscrutable, may flash forth without warning, overwhelming the familiar and the ordinary, destroying, too, the sense of orientation guaranteed by those. The boy's sense of disorientation is pointedly present when he looks "all round for my lost guide": it is difficult to reduce the phrase "lost guide" to the homely specific, "honest James" (l. 283).

If we briefly consult Heidegger once more, then the insecurity of the child might be glossed as the fear that Being may dissolve into Nothing. The fear of Nothing is related to the state of anxiety that promotes the sense of the uncanny in the first place. As Jean Wahl summarizes this aspect of Heidegger's philosophy: "Through anguish we sense this Nothingness, from which erupts everything that is, and into which everything threatens at every instant to crumble and collapse." This might serve as one gloss on the radical sense of uncertainty that seems to threaten Wordsworth's otherwise stable and substantial natural world.

III

There is a possibility, however, that in invoking Heidegger in this way we may be guilty of "updating" Wordsworth and making him too much our contemporary (whereas part of what I want

to stress is his intermediary position between older modes of awareness and more modern). But the general point about the gibbet-episode is the same as that to be inferred from the uncanniness of the moonlight poems: it concerns Wordsworth's awareness of the essential strangeness of what might, on the face of it, be regarded as simply naturalistic. It is because of the tension between the alien and the ordinary that the moonlight-poetry achieves its disturbingly ambiguous (or intermediary) character. One possible term for the resultant poetic world thereby created is, as I initially proposed, "preternatural"; better still, we can insist upon the term "uncanny," but (following Heidegger) with a more precise sense of its implications.

One of the problems in evaluating Wordsworth's imaginative stance (both here and elsewhere) arises from his intermediary position not only between the strange and the familiar, the supernatural and the actual, but between differing attitudes to the natural world and to the numinous which we may term, respectively, Romantic and modernist. Broadly speaking, the Romantic attitude is one that rejoices in the strangeness, sensing in it the possibility of revelation, the imminence of transparency; the modernist is that which recoils from the strange as that which is merely alien and non-human, irredeemably opaque. And Wordsworth's complexity of attitude is further compounded if (following the hint of D. G. James) we regard such an episode as that of the encounter with the soldier as a secularized equivalent of the (traditional) numinous.¹⁶

Wordsworth's moonlight-poetry, in its intermediary and ambiguous nature, suggests a world that is both potentially hierophantic and disturbingly strange. A close reading of that poetry would have to come to terms with an imagery which is charged with latent significance (perhaps of an otherworldly kind) that yet refuses to define itself in a mode palpably symbolic: Wordsworth's poetic world insists upon its own indeterminacy. Later in the nineteenth century, for a writer like Melville in *Moby Dick*, symbol turns hieroglyph as the universe becomes a book that is increasingly difficult to read, an Egyptian mystery to which the imagination's best hermeneutical skill has only limited application. Wordsworth stands on the verge of that shadow. If the

idiot boy can embrace the mystery as a natural habitat, the poet in *Peter Bell* must acknowledge the mystery even as he accommodates its alien presence within the rhythms of the known, the familiar, the common (hawker and donkey); while in the soldier-episode from Book IV of *The Prelude*, the alien presence is so purely acknowledged that it finally resists assimilation.

NOTES

- Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 124, 18.
- ² Mary Moorman, commenting on the normality of the poems written during the first year at Town-End, Grasmere, notes incidentally how Wordsworth has now "moved away from the moonlight world of *The Idiot Boy* and *Peter Bell*," which were written at Alfoxden. *William Wordsworth*, a Biography: the Early Years, 1770-1803 (Oxford: O.U.P., 1957), p. 480.
- ³ The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1962), I, 35-36.
- ⁴ Jonathan Wordsworth suggests that the "moving accidents" of Bürger's Leonora are made fun of in Wordsworth's Idiot Boy, "where Leonora's moonlit ride to the tomb with her dead, and increasingly skeletal lover is evoked in Johnny's mock-heroic journey." The Music of Humanity (London: Nelson, 1969), p. 69n.
- ⁵ The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the Early Years, 1787-1805, ed. E. de Selincourt; 2nd edn., revd. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967: hereafter referred to as EY), p. 492.
- ⁶ EY, p. 357. (A footnote refers the reader to Ephesians iii. 9 and Colossians iii. 3.)
- Oswald's destructive urge to seek revenge is initially fostered by a natural environment which is too alien to offer any diversion from his self-preoccupation ("a dead sea under a burning sky": see *The Borderers*, ll. 1695-1702); while Marmaduke's misguided resolve to kill Herbert is finally dissipated when he is "summoned...back" to a sense of reality by the twinkling star (ll. 987-88, 1213ff.) To be alienated from the natural world can be a prelude to moral deviance (which is not unrelated to insanity: this is Oswald's case, in whom pride "borders even upon madness"—see *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Owen and Smyser [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], I, 79); and this condition, once established, is the index of alienation from both nature and society. On the other hand, Marmaduke is (temporarily, at least) rescued from such deviance by saving intercourse with the natural.
- ⁸ EY, p. 355.
- ⁹ Frederick Garber, Wordsworth and the Poetry of Encounter (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 137. Garber's related comments on the "egotistical sublime" may also shed further light on what happens in The Idiot Boy: "The egotistical sublime, which is an imposition of self upon that which is not self, is in part a protective gesture which makes familiar what is potentially dangerous... what the egotistical sublime does... is overwhelm the landscape into the suffocation of its integral being"

- (Garber, p. 191). The idiot boy, we may feel, is one who quite spontaneously and unselfconsciously practises a form of the egotistical sublime as explicated by Garber, i.e., sees the landscape as continuous with himself, thereby achieving a sense of integration.
- There is, however, the notorious stanza originally included in the 1819 version (after l. 515) with its bizarre description of "a party in a parlour," all "silent and all damn'd!" Even in the originally published version, there is an attraction to what we may broadly categorize as the grotesque.
- 11 One of the most interesting analyses of the soldier-episode is given by D. G. James in *The Romantic Comedy* (London: O.U.P., 1948), pp. 82-85. He couples the passage with Keats's description of the face of Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and concludes by hinting that both passages may be seeking to depict a secular equivalent of the incarnate divine: "I suggest that the two passages convey perceptions of the same order and kind, of a state in which there is manifested an extreme helplessness and submission to suffering, and also a plenitude of power; and the old and homeless soldier 'of stature tall'... has the sublimity and awfulness of a God."
- Wordsworth and the Poetry of Encounter, pp. 137, 130, 121. See also p. 188, on Wordsworth's recognition of the possibility of being "a stranger to the world."
- ¹³ Arthur A. Cohen, Martin Buber (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1957), p. 17.
- Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; repr. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), p. 233.
- ¹⁵ Jean Wahl, A Short History of Existentialism, transl. Forrest Williams and Stanley Maron (1949; repr. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 12.
- 16 See n. 11 (above).