

LOUIS MASSIGNON

The Vow and the Oath

Patrick Laude

Translated from a revised and augmented version of
Massignon intérieur (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2001)

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INTRODUCTION

The life and work of Louis Massignon (1883-1962) are informed, oriented and determined by the sense of the Absolute. For him, the truth is always situated beyond the relativity of concepts and actions which might reduce one's relationship with the Absolute to a vain philosophy or a mere contract of good conduct with Heaven. This uncompromising sense of the Absolute constitutes without any doubt the major affinity connecting Massignon to Islam. The grammatical structure of the type *ce n'est pas ... c'est*¹—so representative of Massignon's style—is akin to a spiritual sympathy at once profound and subtle: it echoes as a leitmotif the *nafy* (negation) and *ithbāt* (affirmation) of the *shahādah*, the profession of faith in Islam.² Thus everything is negated that could be erected or construed as an object of worship, in order to clear the ground for the witnessing of the One Reality. The Massignonian approach is therefore fundamentally oriented towards the inner truth of the soul and the ultimate Object of its love.

In a world where ideas and actions are often evaluated by standards of flat literality or in their relation with slogans and conventions which limit their meaning to easily marketable and

¹ Below, we quote a few typical examples gleaned from Massignon's work: "Man is not made for works of external mercy, but first of all to worship the divine Guest in his heart, in the present moment." "Time is therefore not a continuous duration, but a constellation of instants." "Understanding the Bible does not mean unifying as we please, by way of new theories, meanings which are parcelled out beforehand in contraposition, but rather to go back to the purest unity of intention that inspired it..."

² Let us recall that the first part of the testimony of faith in Islam, *lā ilāha illa 'llāh* (no god but God), is based on a marked contrast between the negation (*nafy*) of idols and vanities, and the affirmation (*ithbāt*) of the Divine as the only Reality.

reassuring formulae, an unconditional pilgrim of the Absolute such as Massignon could not but run the risk of being misunderstood. From this point of view, Massignon may be deemed to be in spiritual consonance with the *khadiriyyah*³ inspiration (to which he would devote a good number of pages), the gentle breeze of the solitary initiator—*al-Khidr* (“the Verdant”), in the sense of being quite often misunderstood and isolated, frequently considered as barely “orthodox” or even “scandalous”, precisely because he strove to find his spiritual bearings in accordance with the heart and the divine *fiat*, according to the Spirit and not the letter. In the Church, he was like a “Muslim”, misunderstood and feared by many, an “exalted” idealist who had no sense of the contingent social “realities”, and little consideration for the European and North American “civilising genius” with which representatives of Western Christianity have so often and repeatedly compromised the message of the Gospel. He became a Melkite priest in order to remain faithful to the Abrahamic transcendence, one of the highest witnesses of which was, for him, the Arabic language. Thus he remained within the Church, as an “oriental Catholic”, in a position of marginal, almost exiled, integration. In Islam, he was not infrequently considered a spy or a proselytiser, an ambiguous presence intent on subverting Islam in order to Christianise it from within. His spiritual marginality, founded as it was on the unconditional choice of the Absolute and of Justice, was also manifested in his affinity with spiritual figures, schools and movements of an atypical character, like Hallāj, Salmān al-Fārsī, extremist Shi‘ites, French legitimists; it also manifested visibly in his mystical apology of women as martyrs of the Spirit; not that all of these tendencies were expressed by virtue of a certain complacent curiosity *vis-à-vis* his own idiosyncratic characteristics, but rather in accordance with an indelible inner mark.

This book is not a biography, nor even a spiritual portrait, of Louis Massignon. Experts and friends of Louis Massignon

³ We are referring here to the universal initiator and mysterious spiritual guide *al-Khidr* (or *al-Khadir*), whom Sufism associates with the freedom of the Spirit “which bloweth where it listeth”.

have had the great merit of providing us with comprehensive and insightful works of such a kind, such as Jean Moncelon and Christian Destremau's *Louis Massignon: Le "cheikh admirable"* (Le Capucin, 2005) and Jacques Keryell's *Louis Massignon: De Bagdad au jardin d'une parole extasiée* (Angers, 2008) in French, and Mary-Louise Gude's *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) in English. Our purpose is different, albeit parallel in spirit: it aims at exploring the inner dimensions of Massignon's work and suggesting the spiritual coherence of its intricate landscape. In quest of this inward dimension of the Massignonian opus, our study is oriented by two axes and four poles. There is first of all a dimension which we propose to describe as the formal pole of Massignonian spirituality, his being rooted in the "mythological" and sacramental context of religion, a dimension which manifests itself most directly in the spiritual geography that "consecrates" his mystical point of view. Then there is another pole, which we would characterise as the informal space of inner femininity, that which Massignon himself called, with Thomas Merton, *le point vierge*, the virginal core of human consciousness. Herein lies the seat of a divine "piercing" or "springing up" that radically transcends all traditional "cartography" of the Spirit; it is also the domain *par excellence* of the freedom of the Spirit, and a plunging into the unadulterated purity of one's relationship with God. Finally, with respect to the world, the Massignonian perspective unfolds in two directions, one principally inclusive, and the other exclusive, the first integrating the diverse expressions of the Spirit on the universal horizon of religious truth—an intrinsic unity asymptotically espoused by a desire for God—and the second pitting its inner strength against the illusory idols of the modern world—on the "battlefield" of the crucifying outwardness constructed by the rejection of God. This Massignonian combat is not a superficially conservative or reactionary rejection of the present, but an uncompromising reminder that modernity is most often understood and built as a pretentious substitute for reality, a delighted island of Promethean promises always at the point of being swallowed into the abyss that keeps it in existence *for the moment*. The four chapters of this book are thus conceived

as complementary critical explorations of these diverse orientations, in a sort of mystical “cross” which may be deemed to embrace the essentials of the inner landscape of the great French islamicist. In tracing this “cross”, our intention is to unfold some of the richest and most profound implications of the two faces of Massignon’s life and work, his spiritual secret and his active destiny, the inner sanctity of his “vow” and the outer witnessing of his “oath”.

SPIRITUAL SPACE AND AXIAL VOCATION

The importance of the high places of the Spirit in the life and work of Massignon has often been noted. Thus, his whole personal sacred geography retraces the steps of an itinerary that is profoundly one and diverse at the same time. This geography is both objective and subjective—it is based upon the collective data of religious mythology and theurgic imprints of the sacred, while being situated and interpreted in terms of a personal set of spiritual issues. Massignon has sometimes been reproached for speaking basically just about Louis Massignon, finding the reflected image of his own spiritual reality in the mirror of places and beings.¹ What this kind of criticism actually affirms, in spite of itself as it were, is that every exceptional spiritual personality necessarily sheds light on the phenomena which it considers from the vantage point of a personal archetype that manifests in an all the more coherent and all-embracing mode as its “secret” is lived more profoundly. Among the great spiritual figures of the twentieth century, perhaps none has emphasised in such a marked and continuous way as Massignon the spiritual meaning and impact of sacred space, which he conceived as a divine

¹ Denis Gril, in his study of the role of spiritual space, stresses the fundamentally idiosyncratic character of Massignon’s approach and conclusions in the following words: “In order to display his astonishing personality, he needed all the space of his opus, and to recognise himself [he needed] witnesses reflecting back the image of his passion. His reader remains condemned to perplexity; between him and his research he will find Louis Massignon.” “Espace sacré et spiritualité, trois approches: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon,” in *D’un Orient l’autre*, Vol. II—Identifications, Paris: CNRS, 1991.

“opening” out and above the at once thickened and fragile space of earthly experience. So it is first of all because spiritual space is so to speak “constituted” by sacred hospitality and the recognition of the Other inherent to it. The encounter with the divine or human Other crystallised by the salutation (*al-salām*) opens a symbolical space which is the *templum* of transcendence. During this encounter, language itself reveals its nature of “pilgrimage” as a way of going out of oneself in order to converge with another in the presence of the Divine Absentee.² In this sense, the homogeneity of the egoic and “endogamic” space is totally disrupted by a “visitation from the Stranger”. This visitation from the Divine by and through a human intermediary is formalised by liturgies and proverbs through a set of gestures and consecrated words.³ A true meeting is not simply an exchange of formalities, it is a blessing and a prayer. This is what modern expeditiousness fails to understand, when mocking the slow, ceremonial, interminable greetings and “*as-salam ‘alaykum*” of traditional people.

It is already intimated that, with Massignon, the mystical concept of a “composition of place”—inherited from Ignatian meditation—takes on a meaning that goes beyond a mere technique of mental meditation. It is not just a matter of conditioning the soul through an imaginary configuration that would provide an adequate psychic framework for formal meditation. In the case of Massignon, the composition of place is rather a way of setting oneself to listen to the spiritual vibrations of a geographical hierophany, so that our own inner voice may converge with that of others whose desire for truth is likewise magnetised by a common place of grace and revelation. In this sense, pil-

² “For language is both a ‘pilgrimage’ and a ‘spiritual displacement’, since a language is not elaborated but to get out of oneself in the direction of another: in order to evoke with him an Absentee, the third person ... the Unknown.” “Valeur de la parole humaine en tant que témoignage,” (1951), *Opera Minora II*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, p. 581.

³ “The Salutation is an exodus of pilgrims seeking to conclude a pact of spiritual hospitality, which necessarily associates (since there is no carnal kinship) the liturgy of the rite to invisible presences.” “L’involution sémantique du symbole,” (1960), *OM II*, p. 627.

grimage is a communion with the “simple hearts” who are unaware of the mental substitutes for the actual visit of sacred sites, those mental journeys “without the need to get up from one’s chair”.⁴ Hence, for Massignon, pilgrimage is the only genuine means of collective sanctification: it is the support *par excellence* of a kind of communal meditation in action. The opening words *Je reviens de ... où je ...* “I have just come back from ... where I ...”, so typically Massignonian, and reoccurring throughout all of his works like an obsessively reiterated testimony, expresses the immediate and concrete hallmark of a spirituality that unceasingly relates to the “incarnating” localisation of the Spirit, as well as to the dynamics of suffering among faithful masses. Symptomatically, Massignon likes to draw a contrast between the two spiritual attitudes that he conceives, in this respect, as respectively “abstract” and “concrete”; thus, his emphasis upon the abyss separating the decadent imagination of a Huysmans⁵ before his conversion—the literary and cerebral “carnal” musing about a place anticipated by a craving for sensual experiences, as in the novel *Against the Grain*, where the city of London is experienced by the main protagonist, Des Esseintes, in the very midst of Paris at the Bodega—from the tactile materiality of Father Foucauld’s relationship with the holy Site.⁶ The decadent “lives”, through an imaginary projection, the place of his purely

⁴ “Le Pèlerinage,” (1949), *OM III*, p. 818.

⁵ The nineteenth-century French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, one of the inspirations and “intercessors” of Massignon, converted to Catholicism following a complex itinerary that took him through aestheticist and “decadentist” experiments, as in his novel *À Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), in which the central character, Des Esseintes, epitomises the end-of-century excesses of artistic refinement and hyper-civilised hedonism.

⁶ “Thus, a sceptical Huysmans organised a short trip to London, without leaving his table at the ‘Bodega.’ In contrast, let us recall the gesture of Foucauld writing in the little notebook which he used to hold on his heart when on pilgrimage, and he was a perpetual pilgrim, a ‘universal brother’: touching the stone of such and such a holy place, where he had managed to kneel with great pain and difficulty, knocking his hard forehead against the blessed slab which he had kissed.” “Le pèlerinage,” (1949), *OM III*, p. 818.

cerebral dreams, whereas the saint touches the very texture of the sacred earth or the theurgic object.

This emphasis on the materiality of physical contact is linked, we believe, to the two fundamental elements of the Christian spiritual economy: the sense of the Incarnation of the divine Presence, and the participation in the sufferings of the Passion. The site of pilgrimage places us in the direct presence of God: it also invites us to transcend ourselves in the sacrifice of our journey towards the beacon of hope. In stressing this sacrificial dimension, Massignon's intention is no doubt to take it out on the easiness and comforts of a lukewarm and abstract Christianity; symbolically speaking, such a spiritual deficiency also implies a gradual distancing, on the part of too many Christians, from the Oriental cradle of Christianity, and therefore *vis-à-vis* the authentically Semitic inspiration which would keep Christendom from civilisationist and "cultural" idolatry. Notwithstanding the incontestable pertinence of his concern for the need to remain faithful to the geographic "incarnation" of the Spirit, Massignon—in spite of the Hallājian inspiration permeating his work—may have sometimes under-emphasised the capacity of genuinely mystical forms and sensibilities to take stock of the ubiquity of the divine Presence in order to point to, and sometimes to realise in a fully consequential way, an inner experience of "displacement" towards the Centre. The circumambulation of Hallāj around the Kaaba of his heart provides, in this sense, a complementary counterpart to the physical hardships of external pilgrimage.

Be that as it may, the vocation of Massignon leads him to reach for high places of the Spirit where the prayers of the faithful masses converge in adoration and hope. In such places, personal vocation and collective destiny meet and intertwine—Massignon having always sought to remain, in conformity to his vow, a vigilant and compassionate witness of human crowds in spiritual migration. To him, a dynamic and collective understanding of pilgrimage may be deemed to be the most powerful antidote to the deadly, static structures of the "concentration camps" of the urban masses—prisoners of the feverish prodigies

of technology. These “concentrationary termite mounds”,⁷ hallucinating creations of the Promethean world of industrial modernity, are polluted sources of vain atomisation and mortal hardening; they swarm with the anonymous masses of dehumanised men who find themselves moved in all directions with a hopeless lack of meaningful orientation. The sole legitimacy of these cities, which are barely true cities any longer, might be to remain the passive repositories of a few quasi-deserted sanctuaries, or what is more likely, the precincts of occult, inner sanctuaries of perhaps forty or four hundred righteous ones, a sodality of forgotten, unrecognised souls who are probably even unaware of their own being like pillars of light.

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It seems appropriate, as a way to preface what develops, to analyse the modes and significance of the spiritual and scholarly emphasis on space in Massignon’s understanding of Islam. It is a known fact that a large segment of his studies in Muslim sociology focuses on the religious and social use of space. The “initiativ” study of the castle of Al-Okhaider (1909), the mediaeval topography of Baghdad (1911), the two major articles devoted to the Muslim *awqāf* (1951) and the City of the Dead in Cairo (1958), as well as commentaries on the plans of Kufa (1935) and Basra (1954), are milestones in this spatial apprehension of Islam. In them Massignon reveals the sharpness of his traveller’s eye, his cartographer’s flair, and his qualities as attentive observer of folkish mores. His scholarly observations amaze readers by their immense scope and the diversity of their modes of expression. Thus, a text on Basra can include considerations on the development of local theological schools together with a detailed list of building dates and types of ships. Precise topographical analyses join lists of personal fiefs as well as abruptly juxtaposed mystical insights. As has been rightly suggested, there is something “illegible” in these abounding and “nervous”

⁷ “Le pèlerinage”, p. 817.

texts filled with notes taken in haste, or with neat observations springing forth from brilliant intuitions, but this “illegibility” also suggests a seething life with all the richness of the spiritual encounters and social interactions shaping a town’s identity. In addition, the choice of the objects of study is not without significance. Indeed, Massignon is primarily interested in the institutions of *awqāf* or religious endowments, in the cemeteries and the tombs of saints, which amounts to saying that archaeological research opens up very promptly onto spiritual considerations. As Denis Gril has pointed out, “in reality, in Massignon’s analysis of the urban landscape another dimension is quickly included; archaeological traces remain for him a testimony of the saints of Islam.”⁸ In other cases—and we are referring especially to *The Passion of al-Hallāj*—it is, conversely, the mystical phenomenology that leads Massignon to lay the “topographical” foundations of the personal experience. Hence the first volume of *The Passion* develops a sociological contextualisation which allows us to better grasp the multiple ramifications of the mystical path of Hallāj in the socio-cultural framework of Abbasid Baghdad.

The discovery of the tombs of saints strikes one as a central element of Massignon’s archaeological itinerary. In Baghdad, for example, the mystical archaeologist points out a topographical error made by Le Strange, a late nineteenth-century historian of Abbasid Baghdad, who had conjectured that the location of Junayd’s tomb was “three miles” away from that of Ma’rūf al-Kharkī. Massignon underlines that this type of scholarly error results from the absence of a concrete study on location: historical abstraction lacks a sense of concrete and committed testimony, a lack that is also the fundamental flaw of the bourgeois religion criticised by Massignon. Correcting the error of Le Strange, Massignon locates Junayd’s tomb “870 steps” away from that of al-Kharkī, and one is certainly tempted to read into these “steps” all the living reality of the scholarly pilgrim’s hours of walking through the most obscure sites and streets of Baghdad. In contrast, a mere topographical error which could have

⁸ Denis Gril, “Espace sacré et spiritualité, trois approches: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon,” in *D’un Orient l’autre*, p. 50.

been ignored as a detail without any religious significance is in fact for Massignon both the mark and the cause of an incapacity to “orientate” the spiritual totality of Baghdad. The “cosmos” of Abbasid Baghdad is thereby left completely shattered: “... and its whole plan has been transformed by this single rectification.”⁹ The tomb of the saint does indeed evoke a spiritual geography which “magnetises” and “distributes” the fragrances of the *barakah*. The spiritual truth is “shrouded” and “dissimulated”, and it requires the archaeologist’s attention as much as it demands the mystic’s loving intuition.

In the same register, at once topographical and mystical, Massignon discovers in Damietta—important ground for the spiritual geography associated with the ordeal of St. Francis¹⁰—the tomb of the thirteenth-century Sufi Shushtari, thanks to the directions of local members of the Shādhiliyyah order. Now, Shushtari also occupies an important place in what may be called Massignon’s “Christic” archaeology of Sufism. Indeed, the literary output of this Andalusian Sufi is characterised by a kind of spiritual transmutation of the crude and popular expressions of love, including “a symbolic transposition of the profession of the prostitutes by singing it in the souqs.”¹¹ In the context of the spiritual geography of the city, Shushtari also represents the concrete presence of sanctity among the common people, and its

⁹ “Le Strange reckons it to be ... three miles away from the well-known tomb of Ma’rouf al Kharkî (d. 200/816), without suspecting that Junayd’s tomb still exists, almost buried, at the heart of a hillock, under the successive alluviums of the graves of his devotees, only 870 steps from the tomb of Ma’rouf al-Kharkî: this whole plan has been transformed by this single rectification.” “Bagdad et sa topographie au Moyen Age: deux sources nouvelles,” (1911), *OM III*, p. 88.

¹⁰ “In Damietta, where St. Francis of Assisi offered himself to the trial of the Fire in 1219 in order to touch the heart of a single Muslim, the Sultan al-Mālik al-Kāmil. God then enabled him to know that He had set him aside for another martyrdom, namely that of stigmatisation and of the Throwing of the Spear of Love, which he would receive two years later, on Alverne, *nel crudo sasso*.” “Cinquième mystère douloureux,” (1957), *OM III*, 844.

¹¹ “Recherches sur Shushtari, poète andalou enterré à Damiette,” (1950), *OM II*, p. 406.

power to alchemically transmute the most lowly or ambiguous human manifestations:

A shaykh from the country of Meknes
Walks through the souqs singing:
“What claim do these men have against me,
And what claim do I have against them?” ...

Nothing is worth his word, when he goes all the way down
the souqs;
Behold the shopkeepers bothering him,
His begging bowl on his neck, his crutches, and his rebel
streaks.
Ah! It is a *shaykh* built on a rock, like every edifice
God Himself builds.¹²

The final reference to what “God Himself builds” seems particularly pertinent in the context of this urban spirituality; every justified “building” is a shrine, and there is no better shrine than a saint’s body in which the divine Presence resides. From this perspective the city would appear as a dynamic place of spiritual testimonies which cross over and fertilise each other through the intertwining of the most diverse levels of traditional reality: work, trade, songs and dances, teaching, worship and religious preaching, not to mention the eccentric allusions of the hoaxer, and the existential riddles of the fool in God.¹³

¹² “Trois mystiques musulmans: Shoshtari, Ahmed Ghazali et Niyazi Misri,” (1925), *OM II*, p. 367.

¹³ “A city of Islam, as I have tried to show in the case of Baghdad ... is first of all a place of gathering, not so much a gathering of monuments making up a fossil museum, but one of knots of streets where the oral testimonies of witnesses, *shuhūd*, circulate; be it for *dallāl* prescriptions for shouting out the sale of wares in the souqs, or making jokes pertaining to jurists in the mosques, schools and tribunals, or proverbs dear to peasants and caravan members, or spiritual sayings and ‘city-street’ songs heard in reception halls and baths, or else theophoric locutions conceived by solitaries in the wasteland of cemeteries,” “La Cité des morts au Caire,” (1958), *OM III*, p. 235.

In this context, the institution of *waqf*, too, has gained Massignon's attention in a very particular way. The *awqāf* are religious public properties, "mortmain estates", whose revenues are allocated to the financial support of the religious foundations, the *waqfiyāt*. The *waqf* is conceived by the believer as a sort of *zakāt* (alms) that is established in perpetuity. It is the conjunction of this dimension of perpetuity and the universal scope of the religious community it involves that gives the *waqf* its foremost spiritual value. Actually Massignon conceived of the principle of *waqf* (be it the case of sacred places, tombs, pilgrimage sites, Qur'anic schools or others) as "the maximal extension of the *Hijra*" both in space and in time.¹⁴ The "exiles" of Islam, pilgrims, refugees or seekers of truth, are thus received everywhere in the maternal bosom of the *ummah*, in a kind of universal hospitality that echoes the Prophet's hospitality towards the *Ashāb as-Suffāh*, the People of the Bench in Medina. In addition, by giving to God, the donor makes it possible to reaffirm the religious cohesion of the community, which is strengthened by the establishment of a place of spiritual convergence. This is why the *waqf* may be considered as one of the most important juridical institutions of Islam: in it, the highest spiritual finality of religion is wedded to economic and social realities that are most fundamental for the very survival of the community. This important point demonstrates that Massignon's profound interest in the *waqf* is ultimately connected to the capacity of this institution to crystallise and co-ordinate a spiritual geography of collective sanctification.

Besides the *waqf*, the urban and spiritual geography of Massignon finds in the Muslim cemetery the testimony of an intricate tangle of individual sanctity and collective piety. If modern Western cemeteries are characterised by an utter absence of

¹⁴ "(The essential role of the *awqāf* is to) perpetuate the community in time and space, since they allow the maximal extension of the *Hijra*, from the hegira of the voluntarily expatriated, of those displaced for religious reasons, to places where the science of their common faith can be renewed: *fi sabīl Allāh*," "Documents sur plusieurs waqfs musulmans," (1951), *OM III*, p. 181.

spiritual expression, an artificial and sterile separation from the world of the living and an individualistic gentrification of more or less dubious taste, the traditional Muslim cemetery is, on the contrary, a veritable centre of contact with the “hereafter” and an eschatological composition of space.¹⁵ In this spiritual framework, Massignon strongly emphasises the role of women, their presence and piety being a determining factor in the spiritual vibrancy and secret inspiration of the “city of the dead”. Women, inasmuch as they give life and perpetuate the “genealogical” line of believers (paradise “lies at the feet of mothers”), are also those who come to pray for the dead on Fridays, weaving thereby a quasi-mystical link between the elect of the hereafter and the believers of the here below. According to the Christian vision of Massignon, such a function arises from a dimension of “substitution”, since, just like the *waqfa* of Arafāt—the standing before God at the Mount of Mercy—it implies a “participation in a common honour of workers”,¹⁶ which evokes the idea of a mystical body of believers, an inner solidarity of all members of the community in a reciprocal intercession and “substitutive love” of all for all. The cemetery is thus a place of privileged and spiritually heightened communication which weaves a psychospiritual fabric in which inner phenomena give shape to a mystical “commerce” among souls. It is in this “crepuscular” zone that sociological Islam and mystical Islam distance themselves *de facto* from theological and puritan abstractions in order to participate in a spiritual world of subtle interdependencies in the name of Presence. Henceforth, it is plain that the significance of places of pilgrimage and worship in Massignon’s vision of Islam results from concepts and practices of sacred space as a collective and dynamic vector of transcendence.

¹⁵ “Our secularisation of urban cemeteries, these proper museums of nothingness, has not reached Qarāfa yet. In 50 years, I got to know its two antithetical aspects for the believer; the dead, whose tombs are brushed by given premonitions of election for some, and damnation for others.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 241.