

# Satinath Bhaduri's 'The Vigil': An Essay on the Novel and History

Sir William Jones (1746-1794), in his famous discourse<sup>1</sup> on Asia, which he delivered at the opening meeting of the Asiatick Society of Bengal in 1784, drew up the map of human knowledge according to what might be called the Baconian plan.<sup>2</sup> Like Francis Bacon (1561-1627) Jones recognised three faculties of mind — memory, reason and imagination and hence the three branches of learning were History, Science and Arts. History 'comprehends either an account of natural productions or the genuine records of empires and states' and Arts 'includes all the beauties of imagery and the charms of invention'.<sup>3</sup> Like Bacon, Jones allowed memory to preside over History and imagination over Arts (what Bacon would call Poetry). We, who live in a more sophisticated age, find such division of human mind into three faculties rather artificial. Historians cannot and do not reconstruct history from memory; they need to provide reasonable answers from the 'records of empires and states' and they need to have disciplined and responsible imagination to understand men of the past years. Archaeology as an academic discipline could not get off the ground had our predecessors taken Bacon very seriously. But although most modern scholars would reject Jones's map of knowledge they are happy to leave their universities divided into faculties and departments. Even in 1973 (it is also true in 1995) it is hard to break the barriers between departments.

It is still widely believed that history and fiction are two contradictory terms; historians are supposed to deal with men and events that really happened, whereas fiction-writers deal with imaginary characters and events. But in fact there is more in common between the two than is generally realised. To most people of many cultures, for many centuries the wall between history and fiction has been very thin. In the ancient world and amongst people of various cultures in Africa, Australia and India today, history is no more than a shapeless, often

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<sup>1</sup> S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 58-63.

<sup>3</sup> S. N. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*

unstructured, story of the past enmeshed with mythology, with 'the creation', 'the divine power' and the 'the beginning of things'. The sequence of great public events known to the elders or written down by the chroniclers mingled freely with the legends, with 'the creation', which often happened beyond the reckoning of time. In the great epics of India and Greece, in the Babylonian *Poem on the Creation* no clear distinction had been made between mythology and history, between fact and fiction, between gods and heroes. There was no clear boundary between what really happened and what was the creation of the poet's imagination. However, in some civilisations like China, in post-Herodotus Greece, in medieval Europe, amongst the Muslims, some form of historiography developed, which tried to free itself from what Collingwood had called 'theocratic' history. But even Herodotus was a storyteller and had unquestionably incorporated many legends in his *History*.<sup>4</sup> Some civilisations never developed historiography beyond the quasi-history level. In ancient India history had always been enmeshed with mythology.<sup>5</sup> Hence modern historians of ancient India rely heavily on archaeological and epigraphic evidence. But fiction is not neglected. In fact more often than not the great Sanskrit dramas and romances produce important missing pieces of that great jigsaw puzzle — the history of ancient India.<sup>6</sup>

History as we know it today evolved in Europe over the course of the five centuries since the beginnings of the Renaissance. The historiography which developed in modern Europe has helped man, if we were to borrow a phrase from Butterfield, to 'emancipate himself from the past'.<sup>7</sup> This is no doubt a very rich legacy; nonetheless it has left us with many problems unresolved. The history that is being taught today in most universities and in most high schools owes a great deal to the tradition left behind by the so-called scientific historians like Ranke and Acton. There has evolved in most parts of the world a critical attitude towards the past and a very high respect for 'facts' amongst

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<sup>4</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 25-31.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Majumdar, 'Ideas of History in Sanskrit literature', and A. L. Basham, 'The Kashmir chronicle' in C. H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, London, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> *Infra*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *History and Man's Attitude to the Past: Their Role in the Story of Civilisation*, Foundation Day Lecture, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 1961, p. 6.

historians and also amongst the ordinary literate people.<sup>8</sup> But somehow it is widely believed that historians are mere 'grabbers of facts' which they gather from dusty books and old records. The classic expression of this cult of facts is to be found in the original scheme for the *Cambridge Modern History* written by Lord Acton. Although most modern western historians will not share Lord Acton's optimism,<sup>9</sup> he and his *Cambridge History* loom large in the minds of most scholars throughout the English-speaking world. The 'facts' that were considered important were about public events and prominent public figures. History was about facts and politics of the past. The interrelationship between politics and society, between ideas and social change, were almost forgotten. However, since the beginning of the 'sixties of this century, a number of historians in the English-speaking world have started to move away from this cult of political history, from this cult of 'pure facts'; (in France such a movement started much earlier — in the 'twenties of this century). Many barriers are now being broken and historians have begun to recognise kinship ties with other social scientists. As the centre of gravity of the new history is moving towards society and social change, historians can no longer ignore fiction.

Every great work of literature has a timeless quality, but it has also a timely quality.<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare's dramas still draw a large audience. They have a universal appeal and an ageless quality. But all students of Shakespeare will recognise a timely quality in the works; his dramas are one of the most important sources of history and culture in Elizabethan England. All great authors of novels, dramas and poems usually leave behind them records of their own experiences and own observations. Such records are no doubt very subjective, but they are very rich, in that sense that they are vivid and expressed freely. They often deal with real human experience. The fiction-writers may not tell us more about the politicians and generals than we can gather from the conventional records of history, but they tell us more about the humble folk and the style of life. The devastating effects of the Napoleonic wars were nowhere better depicted than in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The Russian

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<sup>8</sup> For a new study on the impact of European historiography on India, see *infra*, pp. 107-15.

<sup>9</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, 1961, pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson M. Blake, "How to learn history from Sinclair Lewis and other uncommon sources", *Stetson University Bulletin*, Vol. LXIV, No. 2, July 1964.

peasants marched into the pages of history from the works of Tolstoy. As Lenin pointed out, 'until this nobleman came along there was no real peasant in our literature'.<sup>11</sup> Recently, Nelson Blake has demonstrated how historians can reconstruct the social history of America during the period between 1910-1940, without the aid of the conventional records of history. If an historian is forced to use novels as the only documents of social history, he could learn, so Blake claims:

how in the early twentieth century rural America had been declining in importance as urban America drew in the arrogant pride. He could learn about changes in dress and behaviour of women and about rebellious youngsters and frustrated parents. He could learn about the passing of an old hierarchy of ranks in the south and the growth of a new agricultural feudalism in the west. He could learn about the unhappy plight of American Negroes and the growing violence in the great American cities.<sup>12</sup>

I think I need not hammer this point any further. Historians cannot ignore fiction, for we have inherited an historiography enmeshed with mythology, for many fiction-writers like Tolstoy have influenced men and changed the course of history (Lenin called him 'the mirror of [the 1905] Russian Revolution') and because we now recognise novels as important documents of social history. As Blake<sup>13</sup> suggested, historians should deal with all types of materials, 'not truth of fiction', 'the cold truth of statistics' and 'lukewarm truths in letters'.

The beginnings of modern Bengali literature can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. It was largely the creation of a newly emerged English educated class — the *bhadralok*. They were influenced by Western literary tradition, more particularly by the English Romantic poets. They drew heavily from the traditional literature of the land going back to the eleventh century. The classical Sanskrit literature and the Indo-Persian literature of the Mughal Court left their imprint on modern Bengali. In the course of the past 150 years Bengal has

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<sup>11</sup> G. Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism*, (trans. Edith Bones), London, 1950, p. 127. For a further discussion on the sociological and historical significance of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, see Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, (trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell), London, 1965, pp. 86-8.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson M. Blake, *Novelists' America; Fiction as History, 1910-1940*, New York, 1967, p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 264.

produced many outstanding novelists and poets and some dramatists and literary critics. One of them, R. N. Tagore, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.<sup>14</sup> All Bengalis are very proud of their literature.

Bengali *bhadralok* are the most politicised people in India. If modern Indians are well versed in the grammar of politics then the *bhadralok* started to learn its alphabet very early at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was, however, at the turn of this century, at the height of the nationalist movement that politics touched all strata of the society.<sup>15</sup> Hence it is rather surprising to find that not many novels were written on the great political movements that must have touched almost every family of the *bhadralok* class. There are in Bengal many outstanding novels on many interesting themes. Some authors were openly propagandist, using their pens to expose 'social evils', while others wrote moving novels on the plight of poor Bengali peasants.<sup>16</sup> But only a small minority attempted to write what might be called 'political novels'. R. N. Tagore's *Gora* is one of the exceptions to this general rule. This novel, which is available in Sydney in English translation, is perhaps the best document about the plight of the Bengali *bhadralok* youth caught up in an anti-British movement at the turn of the century. Many other novels are useful documents of Bengali social history, but they are not easily available in Australia and not all of them have been translated into English. To illustrate my point on novels and history, I have chosen a political novel, *Jagari (The Vigil)*, written by Satinath Bhaduri and which has been translated into English by Lila Ray.<sup>17</sup> This is a story about a Bengali family in Bihar caught up in the Gandhian Quit-India Movement of 1942.

Satinath Bhaduri (1906-1965) was born into a Bengali middle-class family in Purnea, a small town in North Bihar. He was brought up in this town and was educated in Patna University. He soon became involved in the Nationalist Movement. He served three terms in prison for his part in the struggle for India's independence. *Jagari* was his first

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<sup>14</sup> For a short history of modern Bengali literature, see Sukumer Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*, New Dehli, 1960, pp. 178-380.

<sup>15</sup> J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in Plural Society: Twentieth-century Bengal*, University of California Press, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> S. N. Mukherjee, 'Introduction to Manik Bandopadhyaya,' *Padma River Boatman*, (trans. Barbara Printer and Yaan Lovelock), Queensland University Press, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Satinath Bhaduri, *The Vigil*, (trans. Lila Ray), UNESCO collection of Representative Works, Indian series, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1965.

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novel; it was written in 1944 and published in 1945, and was an immediate success. It was the first novel to be written against the political and social background of the 1942 Movement. He received the Rabindra Memorial Prize awarded by the West Bengal government in 1950. Bhaduri's total output was not very impressive in quantity, but the quality of his works gave him a permanent position in the history of Bengali literature. His other great novel, *Doraicharit Manas*, was also set against the Gandhian movement in Bihar. It is important to remember that the author himself was in prison during the 1942 Movement.<sup>18</sup>

On 31 August 1942, a panic-stricken Viceroy of India telephoned Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Britain: 'I am engaged here in meeting by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed from the world for reasons of military security.'<sup>19</sup> Linlithgow, the Viceroy, was right. In August 1942, the British faced the most widespread, sometimes very violent, anti-colonial rebellion in India since the Great Rebellion and Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It was very alarming, since the uprising took place when the Japanese were pressing hard on the Eastern frontiers and government efforts were chiefly directed towards fighting the war. The revolt touched almost all sections of the population and engulfed the whole country. Many large areas were out of British control for days and many villages for months, particularly in North Bihar and in South-west Bengal.<sup>20</sup>

The 1942 Movement was the third of the great mass movements which were sponsored by the Congress Party under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It came at a time when the long drawnout negotiations for a constitutional settlement between the British governments in London and Simla and the Congress leaders had ended in a complete deadlock. On August 8, 1942, the All India Congress Committee passed a resolution asking the British to quit India and urging every Indian to 'go the fullest length under *Ahimsa* [non-violence]' to bring about a

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<sup>18</sup> Bhaduri was taken into custody and sent to Bhgalpur Prison on 11 August 1942; K. K. Datta, *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar*, Vol. 3, 1942-47, Patna, 1958, Appendix H.

<sup>19</sup> Marquess of Linlithgow to Churchill, India Office Records, MSS Eur. F. 125/158, as quoted in Nicholas Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power, 1942-47*, London, H.M.S.O., 1971, pp. 853-4.

<sup>20</sup> Amba Prasad, *The Indian Revolt of 1942*, Delhi, 1958, pp. 77-8.

complete deadlock in the country.<sup>21</sup> The British replied with mass arrests of the Congress leaders and the country was plunged into utter chaos and anarchy not experienced by her people since 1857.

There were four distinct phases of the August Rebellion which lasted from 9 August 1942 till 5 May 1944, when Gandhi was released from prison. The first phase, which lasted for a few days, was no different from the traditional Congress Civil Disobedience Movement. There were mass demonstrations and *hartals* [complete with suspension of all business] in all the big cities and in most of the towns and villages. Most workers left their factories for several days. The unions managed by the Communist Party, however, held aloof. The Communist Party had decided to support the Government in their war efforts. During the second phase, the Gandhian leadership had no control over the Movement and it took a violent turn. There were large-scale attacks on Government property. The chief targets of mob fury were railway stations, police stations, post offices, tramcars and buses. Attempts were made to dig up roads, damage the railways lines, telegraph and telephone systems. During the third phase of the Movement the revolutionaries started setting up their own governments in areas where the British had lost control. It took months and the ruthless use of the Air Force to regain control of these villages. By February 1943, the Revolt was almost over, but students all over the country organised demonstrations on the ninth day of each month until Gandhi was released, in May 1944.<sup>22</sup>

The gravity and extent of the Revolt can be measured from the Table given below. The statistics are taken from Government statements issued during the Revolt. The unofficial figures supplied by the revolutionaries are much higher than those in this Table.

1.	Number of Bomb Explosions.....	664
2.	Number of Bombs & Explosives Discovered	1,319
3.	Number of Cases of Sabotage to Roads.....	474
4.	Collective Fines.....	Rs. 97,382
5.	Number of Sentences of Whipping Inflicted	2,862
6.	Number of Arrests Made.....	91,836
7.	Number of Fatal Casualties Due to Police Fire	763

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<sup>21</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-80.

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8.	Number of Fatal Casualties Due to Military Fire	297
9.	Number of Cases of Police Defection.....	216
10.	Number of Police Casualties.....	63
11.	Estimated Losses of Railway Property	Rs. 5,200,000

It is important to remember that the majority of the revolutionaries in North Bihar were members of the Congress Socialist Party. The Communists, on the other hand, actively discouraged people to join the Movement.<sup>23</sup> By February 1943, the Government was successful in bringing the situation under their control. The British were successful since a large section of the Muslim population did not take part in the Movement,<sup>24</sup> because the Civil Service and the Police Force remained loyal, and the Indian armed forces helped to quell an all Indian rebellion as they had done in 1857. But the August Revolt was an important landmark in the history of the Freedom Struggle; it demonstrated more clearly than ever the universal dislike of the British Raj in India. It is a story full of sacrifice and martyrdom on the part of many people from all sections of the community and from all parts of the country.

If we wish to study the history of the 1942 Movement we can consult various sources. It is rich in official records both in India and London. There are many memoirs, letters and political pamphlets written by those who took part in the Movement, as revolutionaries, as police officers, and as Nationalist leaders. The sources throw much light on various aspects of the Revolt. Thus, if we wish to know about the high-level negotiations and the British official reaction to the Nationalist challenge, then we should look at the series now being edited by Dr Mansergh.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, if we wish to study the activities of the revolutionaries and police repression, we should consult volumes on the history of the Freedom Movement being issued from the various states in India.<sup>26</sup> The appendices of some of these works are rich in statistical material.

There are some excellent monographs on the subject. There is a blow-by-blow account of the Revolt in Amba Prasad's *Indian Revolt of 1942*. There is a provocative study of the Gandhian concept of anarchy

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<sup>23</sup> Francis G. Hutchins, *Spontaneous Revolution: The Quit India Movement*, Delhi, 1971, pp. 337-40.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 287-90.

<sup>25</sup> N. Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power, 1942-7* (see Preface).

<sup>26</sup> K. K. Datta, *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar*, (see Introduction).



and its practical implications in 1942 in Francis Hutchin's *Spontaneous Revolution*.

Such sources do help us to understand the importance of the Movement and the people who were involved in it. But somehow history of a revolution which involved thousands of men and women when written from the conventional standpoint provides us with bare scaffolding, not the real building. Fiction can help historians to construct the unfinished building. The sources tell us that there were 91,836 people in prison and 2,862 were whipped. But the sources do not help us to share the feelings of a prisoner or one who was whipped. The human situation in a political upheaval can only be understood through very personal records, where such situations can be depicted freely and vividly. Good novels are such personal records.

Satinath Bhaduri's *The Vigil* is, in my opinion, an important source of the history of the August Revolt. The novel does not give us any further information about the Gandhi-Viceroy talks on the Constitutional settlement or the progress of the Revolt than we can gather from the conventional sources of history. Nor is it a mere description of gaol life or of ideological conflicts amongst political prisoners. It is about the plight of a family caught up in a political upheaval.

The family in the novel is a Bengali middle class family living in a small town in North Bihar. Bhaduri himself came from such a family. The father in the novel was the headmaster of a boys' school, but resigned his post in response to Gandhi's call for non-co-operation. He built a Gandhian Ashram [commune] where his two sons, Bilu and Nilu, grew up and got involved in the political movement. In May 1943, three members of the family are in prison, in Purnea, a town in North Bihar. The father is in the Upper Division Ward,<sup>27</sup> the mother in the Women's Ward, for their part in the Gandhian Civil Disobedience Movement in 1942. Their eldest son, Bilu, is waiting in the condemned cell to be hanged for his part in armed rebellion against the British in 1942. Bilu is a member of the Congress Socialist Party, but his brother, Nilu, is a member of the Communist Party. Nilu was so convinced that his brother was wrong in waging an armed struggle against the government which was fighting an anti-fascist Peoples' War, that he gave evidence against Bilu.

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<sup>27</sup> In India, the political prisoners were divided into two groups: first class prisoners and third class prisoners. The first class prisoners used to be housed in the Upper Division Ward and received better treatment than the third class prisoners.

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The action of the novel takes place during one night in May 1943, the night before Bilu was to be hanged. It is divided into four sections, one for each of the four main characters — ‘Prison walls divided them and they were confined within their own hearts, locked up in their own thoughts. Talking to themselves in a silent monologue which is free from the inhibitions external communication or vocal exchange would impose, they tell us about themselves, about the lives they have led, about the country.’<sup>28</sup>

It starts with Bilu’s ruminations about his own life. In 1943 he was thirty-three years old. His ruminations, together with those of his brother, constitute a social document of high caste middle-class Bengali childhood in North Bihar in the ‘twenties of this century, although the family was not a typical Bengali family since the father had thrown himself into the Gandhian Movement. But here we have a document which vividly describes life in a small town, the family feuds, the Bihari and Bengali neighbours and their caste taboos, a possessive but loving mother, a very strong-willed father who kept his distance from his children, and the gradual estrangement between parents and sons. As the sons grew out of parental control they grew out of Gandhian politics. The author also helps us to understand the mind of a condemned prisoner. The records tell us that a number of people received the death penalty; but it is Bhaduri’s Bilu who tells us what it was like to await the gallows:

My connection with the world outside my cell is through the ear. The only person to whom I can speak is the warder. It’s no pleasure to talk with the warder. Walls are all around me. The gaze of my eyes is repulsed no matter in which direction I look now, but my ears are alert, always eager for any sound outside. The cell is sixteen feet long, ten feet wide. There is a heavily barred door in the front. In the south wall there is a small window, high up, close to the ceiling...The only furniture in the cell consists of two earthen bowls blackened with tar which are set in a corner.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Lila Ray’s Introduction to *The Vigil*, p. viii.

<sup>29</sup> *The Vigil*, pp. 4-5.

He has a sense of martyrdom about his death sentence, and takes offence when he is referred to as the 'chief convict' of the gaol:

The word convict makes me think of ordinary robbers and murderers. The connection is inescapable. The warder puts me on their level, identifies me with criminals when he uses it...In the eyes of the warder I am not an honoured patriot!<sup>30</sup>

The father's monologue gives us a fairly good picture of prison life in the Upper Division Ward. The political prisoners do not come out with haloes round their heads in Bhaduri's novel. They were just like the people outside the prison walls. They quarrel over food, over water, and often stop speaking to one another. Castes and ideologies divide them, but they are united in their dislike of the Government and their respect for a patriot who is about to die for his country's freedom. We do not quite understand why the father left his respectable profession and joined the Ghandian Movement. But we see the type of pressure that men like him had to face when they decided to leave a comfortable life and join it. The English Director of Public Instruction asked him to think again; his neighbour said to him, 'Why are you getting mixed up with all this? You're married. You have a wife and children. Is it right for you to take the plunge without first considering the consequences.'<sup>31</sup>

We begin to understand why thousands of men and women gave up their jobs and their homes to fill the prisons in response to Gandhi's call when we read the mother's monologue. She probably represents the majority of ordinary people — peasants and workers from the semi-literate and illiterate classes. When her husband decided to give up his job and join the Congress Party she decided to follow him: 'Do what you think best. What opinion can a woman have?'

She could not give up her caste prejudices, she was always afraid in case her children ate food in a Muslim household which was against caste rules; she could not allow her son to marry a Bihari girl: 'They don't suit each other. How can a Bihari girl be a good match for a Bengali boy? Each in his own place is all right.' To her, as to millions of people in India, Gandhism was another religion. In a bitter mood the mother complains:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Gandhiji! What have you brought me to! You've turned us into beggars, really and truly beggars. Unless you put something into our hands at the end of every month we have nothing to eat. I have worshipped you, setting aside my ancestral gods. For you I have left friends and kindred, for you, forgotten laughter. What have you given me in return? Not a great deal, I must say! Discord between husband and wife over what you ask us to do, discord between father and sons, brother turned into the enemy of brother! Home torn by strife! I have murmured your name as I told my beads at vespers, abandoning the traditional prayers. A lamp is set alight every evening at the spot where you sat when you visited our ashram many years ago. I have spun every single day. Was it for this?<sup>32</sup>

Scholars who have been searching for an answer about Gandhi's charisma will perhaps find no better document than this monologue of a mother whose son is about to die.

Although this novel in its English form is not so powerful as the original, it is still a good document of history and I would hope that it will be read by historians of modern India.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.