



The Didactic Approach in Poetic Selections: Examples from Abū Tammām's *Ḥamāsah*

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Abstract

Abu Tammam is considered one of the most prominent poets of the Abbasid era who devoted special attention to the art of poetic selection. In his anthology Al-Hamasah, he compiled a wide variety of poetic excerpts that embody a clear didactic orientation. This approach highlights specific themes that connect poetry with human and social values.

The didactic tendency is manifested in three main sections:

- **Heroism (Ḥamasah):** *where Abu Tammam emphasized values of courage and generosity, linking them with steadfastness and dignity, as seen in the poetry of 'Antarah, which combines moral and physical strength.*
- **Elegies:** *where laments became a means of reminding humanity of its mortality, urging patience and reflection. This transcends mere sorrow, taking on an ethical and philosophical dimension.*
- **Old Age:** *where he selected poems that recall the passing of time and the necessity of seizing it, reflecting an inclination close to asceticism and wisdom.*

Thus, Abu Tammam's choices were far from arbitrary; they were grounded in a critical and intellectual vision that granted the selected texts a new life and a meaning that surpassed their original context. His anthology Al-Hamasah therefore became a literary school in reading Arabic poetry and reinvesting it in service of society and thought.

Keywords: *Abu Tammam – Al-Hamasah – didactic orientation – poetic selections – human values*

L'approche didactique dans les sélections poétiques : exemples tirés de la Ḥamāsah d'Abū Tammām

Résumé

Abu Tammam est considéré comme l'un des poètes les plus éminents de l'ère abbasside, qui accordait une attention particulière à l'art de la sélection poétique. Dans son anthologie Al-Hamasah, il a compilé une grande variété d'extraits poétiques qui incarnent une orientation didactique claire. Cette approche met en évidence des thèmes spécifiques qui relient la poésie aux valeurs humaines et sociales.

La tendance didactique se manifeste dans trois sections principales :

- *L'héroïsme (Ḥamasah) : Abu Tammam y met l'accent sur les valeurs de courage et de générosité, qu'il associe à la fermeté et à la dignité, comme en témoigne la poésie d' 'Antarah, qui combine force morale et force physique.*
- *Élégies : où les lamentations deviennent un moyen de rappeler à l'humanité sa mortalité, en appelant à la patience et à la réflexion. Cela transcende la simple tristesse, prenant une dimension éthique et philosophique.*
- *Vieillesse : où il a sélectionné des poèmes qui rappellent le passage du temps et la nécessité de le saisir, reflétant une inclination proche de l'ascétisme et de la sagesse.*

Ainsi, les choix d'Abu Tammam étaient loin d'être arbitraires ; ils reposaient sur une vision critique et intellectuelle qui conférerait aux textes sélectionnés une nouvelle vie et une signification qui dépassait leur contexte d'origine. Son anthologie Al-Hamasah est donc devenue une école littéraire pour lire la poésie arabe et la réinvestir au service de la société et de la pensée.

Mots-clés : *Abu Tammam – Al-Hamasah – orientation didactique – sélections poétiques – valeurs humaines*



Introduction

Perhaps the most enduring manifestations of poetic legacy are those anthologies of selected verses that have attained a lofty place in the corpus of Arabic poetry. They drew great attention from critics, linguists, and rhetoricians, forming for them a rich source from which they extracted grammatical evidence, critical judgments, and rhetorical illustrations.

Among the anthologies that received remarkable care and gained widespread fame is Abu Tammam's *Al-Hamasah*. It was even said of him that in this anthology he was "more of a poet than in his own poetry." Alongside it appeared his *Minor Hamasah*, known as *Al-Wahshiyat*, in which he followed the same method of selecting and classifying poetic fragments as in his greater *Hamasah*. Nevertheless, the *Minor Hamasah* did not shine with the same brilliance in the realm of criticism, except for scattered faint references dispersed across books and studies, despite originating from the same author.

Abu Tammam distinguished himself with a perspective that diverged from the common practice of classifying and arranging poetry. He deliberately chose poetic fragments rather than complete odes, placing them under headings – some of which were familiar to poets and critics of his time, while others were innovative. Hence, this study seeks to explore some of those sections and to understand how Abu Tammam managed to assign certain fragments to one category rather than another, based on an aesthetic vision inspired by his poetic philosophy.

1. The Section of Hamasah

The lexical units that shaped Abu Tammam's act of selection in the Hamasah section are centered around two axes: one central and most frequently recurring the sword; and the other secondary, yet sharing the same semantic field – blood and horses.

These lexical units derived their force from being signifiers of what falls within the realm of hamasah, through the artistic imagery offered by the poets of this section: depictions of attack and retreat, combat and clashes, and the material and human losses left behind by battles.

In this section, Abu Tammam sought to establish a relationship between what was historical representing the daily lives of those poets and how it was reflected artistically and aesthetically in their poetry. This interplay stirred his admiration and led him to select those particular fragments and classify them under the section of Hamasah.

- **The Sword in the Section of Hamasah**

The field of war with its battlefield scenes, the weapons employed, and the traces they leave – constitutes the richest imagery of hamasah. Thus, Abu Tammam selected verses and poetic fragments that employed the image of the sword, the instrument upon which the ancient Arab relied both in attack and in defense. The Arab poet sang the praises of the sword, seeing in its possession the means to secure his safety and survival, to extend his dominance, and to instill fear in his enemies – without neglecting other instruments that served the same function.

As al-Nu'man ibn Tawlab says¹ :



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“The events and days have left from Nimir ...the remnants of an ancient sword, its trace still visible.”

Sa’d ibn Malik ibn al-Aqaysar al-Sa’di says ⁱⁱ:

“You meet a man – if you face him, it is with his sword...the days will teach you what you did not know.”

And one of the sons of Tha’lab says ⁱⁱⁱ:

“The sword quivers with longing for intimacy... death watches, and fate awaits.”

And Tawbah ibn Mudarris al-Sadi says ^{iv}:

Even if I were given two thousand noble she-camels...with their offspring, and sixty herdsmen to tend them, I would not accept them from a night-raider...without seeing the blood of Banu Hisn flowing on the sword.

And Abu al-Walid says ^v:

Shall those wolves devour it...while no hand and arm has served as food for the sword’s blade?

These poetic testimonies reveal the sacred value the sword held among the Arabs, as the most prominent instrument in battles and various confrontations.

The sword is mentioned in the singular form throughout these verses, for the poet here sings of his own bravery and valor. Its singular usage points to the individual’s courage and ardor. The sword, which accompanied humankind – not only the Arab but many other nations – was considered the ultimate instrument of power in disputes between individuals and groups.

- **Horses in the Section of Hamasah**

The Arab could not dispense with horses, for they accompanied him in his travels and movements, as well as

in the battles he fought. The warrior would throw himself into the heart of combat, and what increased his courage and confidence was that very steed he rode. For this reason, horses appear prominently in most of the heroic scenes. Malik ibn Ḥuraym ibn Malik al-Hamdani says ^{vi}:

We brought the horses from the lofty land of Ḥimyar ...
until we descended into the land of Najran in fours.
Whoever comes to us, or dares to block our path ... will
find a clear trace, a trail, and slaughtered spoils.
And any camel whose saddle was fastened upon it ... even
if purebred they tied it up, torn apart.
You see the spirited young mare shaking its head...
restless while among us is the proud stallion adorned.
We strip the slave of his sandals for his poor leading ... so
that the slave may be more humbled to guidance.
They had promised him a pass to reach it ... yet he did not
attain it until he saw dawn armored.
The grazing ground consumed his heels, and by morning
... the tips of his feet were dripping blood in tears.
They climbed the slopes, then ascended the summit ...
passed the sandy plain, and descended the barren waste.
The charging horses carry me forth a thrust ... when they
gallop, their hooves strike together.
When one of their forelegs lands in a hollow ... the echoes
of the three valleys resound in thunder

Abu al-Khattar al-Kilabi says ^{vii}:

Banu Marwan have shed our blood for Qays ... and in God
in lies a just judge if they are not fair.
As though they had not witnessed Marj Rahit ... nor knew
who it was that there held the merit.
We shielded you from the heat of the spears with our
souls... and you had no cavalry but us, nor any infantry



Anas ibn Mudrik al-Khathami says ^{viii}:

We brought the horses from the west of our land ... to the side of Ashwal and to Dhat Busaq."

'Abd Allah ibn Thawr, brother of Banu al-Bakka' ibn 'Amir, says ^{ix}:

Has it not reached Abu Hassan that we... have mourned him with the tips of spears?

They mounted with horses to Nakhlah till it rose ... against the enemies with the slaughtering death.

With them we cleave through years unbothered ... through barren pastures and through fertile fields.

We brought the horses from above, upon them ... the call was made for the morning ride.

Their hooves, lean and swift, strike and miss not ... yet the hoof of the bold stallion remains firm.

We descended from their orchards upon them ... and said at midmorning: 'Here is the open plain!

'Abdah al-Absi says ^x:

When we urged the horses, they plunged us into the spears ... as the full-grown camels plunge into swelling floods.

They assailed us with volleys, then our swords ... returned and cut down the hostile tribe in pieces."

Mikhlab al-Mujashi says ^{xi}:

Did Kalb plunder my possession, and I not guard its pasture? ... Why then in war was I named Mikhlab ('Claw')?

I brought upon them the horses till I crushed them... at Hawmal and al-Miqrah, in fierce and raging charge.

We seized from them half their tales ... when they rode forth or mounted to Mecca in journey.

The poets took pride in horses, making them partners in their lives: they carried their journeys to distant lands, and through them they crossed long distances without fearing any enemy. Horses thus became a source of confidence and a wellspring of courage, with which they charged and retreated. Among the Arabs, as well as other nations, horses stood out as the most indispensable companions in heroic scenes. This made poets lavish praise upon them, regarding them as one of the most important causes of victory. This is clearly evident in the preceding examples, where horses appear as a lexical unit in the plural form, and in the poetic fragments that include them they emerge as a central word upon which the poet builds his descriptions. He begins with them, marveling at their strength in attack and retreat, and returns to them to make of them a friend to whom he confides his secrets in times of distress, solitude, and leisure.

Abu Tammam's choice of horses, and his making them one of the sources of his wonder and his acceptance of the heroic scenes in which they appear, seems to be due to his being a poet deeply affected by horses. For him, they were a mark of pride. He expressed sincere admiration for the powerful steeds that fill their owner with pride, as they cut through the soil of battle without fear and aid in achieving victory. He highlights their qualities, proud of possessing them, fascinated by them. The attentive observer of this unique image realizes the depth of Abu Tammam's description of horses so much so that he was considered among the describers of horses. He says:



**The finest treasure of this world you were granted ... a
noble steed neither frail nor of mixed breed.
Its halter is of arak-wood, while behind the saddle ... rests
a stone on which the rider sits firm.
Perfected in its kind, it reached the utmost measure ... in
itself alone it is a singular breed.
Its ancestors preserved the noble line ... as horses coursed
through their veins in pride.
And when its rider whispers to it ... it understands as
humans understand.
When it casts its glance from its dark eyes ... it is an omen,
as though it were fate.
And when its bright blaze shines forth ... your eyes
behold it as though it were lightning.
Every precious reward is diminished compared to it ... for
without it, all other gains are loss.
My worries were cut away by its polished form ... the
youth of all tribes take pride in its smooth flanks.
Exalted in its head and brow ... it casts down the weak for
their shameful deeds.^{xii}**

2. The Section of Elegies (al-Marathi)

The prevalence of elegy in poetry was similar to that of hamasah, as the two were interconnected, one leading to the other. The Arabs used to elegize their heroes in their martial poems, aiming thereby to stir their tribes to seek vengeance for them ^{xiii}. From this we may say that elegy is an extension of hamasah, and sometimes its consequence, for plunging into the turmoil of war never fails to bring about the fall of the slain. Thus, enthusiasm and valor are followed by grief and lamentation, and elegy comes as an outlet for the soul to

release its sorrows sorrows that find no cure except in weeping over the departed and enumerating his virtues ^{xiv}.

In addition to death in battle, we also find natural death as a motive for elegy. This sudden death or that which comes after a struggle with illness leads the poet to elegize himself or those of his family and kin whom he has lost.

Since the earliest times, poets have composed verses expressing their anxiety and fear of death, for it represents the conflict of the self with its anxious ego. When the thought of death dominates the poet, he lives his days in constant fear and apprehension of it, for nothing shakes and stirs the human soul more than death itself. Calamities and misfortunes, and the human awareness of them, are a strong impulse for elegy, behind which wisdom sometimes emerges in the poets ^{xv}.

Quss ibn Saidah, in describing death as an inevitable end with no escape, says:

**When I saw the paths ... to death with no returning
sources,
I knew with certainty ... that I must go where the people
had gone.^{xvi}**

The phenomenon of life's end for the Arab was embodied either in death or in killing. Thus, he viewed war, and the signs of aging such as gray hair, old age, and weakness, as occasions for elegy.

The elegy of the poet whether for himself or for those of his kin forms two faces that determine the axis of the elegiac poem: either he enumerates the virtues of those connected to him by ties of brotherhood, friendship, lineage, or similar relations, reflecting on how death severed their bonds; or he elegizes himself, expressing his feelings towards the



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haunting thoughts of death, illness, and incapacity, and the emotions that accompany them. In such moments he feels that his life is drawing to its end, closing off from him all joy and happiness. He thus lives in contradiction: expecting death, while at the same time desiring long life a life which never granted him full satisfaction in its pleasures.

The elegies selected by Abu Tammam in his *al-Wahshiyyat* are woven around one central lexical unit: "death", and two secondary units: "weeping" and "the grave."

- **Death in the Section of Elegies**

Death constitutes the endpoint of all living beings. It is an end that causes man anxiety, since its time and place remain unknown. Despite being one of the most firmly held certainties, we find man struggling so that he might reach his death and end in safety.

Abu Tammam traced the word "death" among many poets, and found it referenced in several forms.

Harithah ibn al-Ubayd al-Kalbi says ^{xvii}:

**Would that before al-Mualla's death I had died, ... or that
the fingers of my right hand had been cut off.**

Marrah ibn Khulayf al-Fahmi says ^{xviii}:

**Truly, al-Azimah and al-Uzza are both buried ... as the
shrouds of a dead man laid in the cave of Rakhman.**

Abu al-Atahiyah says ^{xix}:

**If the Fates had unwrapped your shrouds for me ... I
would have complained to you of what they had done to
me.**

al-Jarnafsh al-Ta'i says ^{xx}:

**So that even their enemy, seeing their patience ... thought
the calamity itself to be a blessing.**

Ibn Umm Ḥaznah al-Abdi says ^{xxi}:

**Yes, had fate been struck down by his death ... then it
would have been a sleeping vengeance.**

Another poet says ^{xxii}:

**As though death knew none but them ... grief after grief,
and grave after grave.**

Abu 'Addas al-Namari says ^{xxiii}:

**He had feared that I might see death before him ... but on
that very morning separation befell me through him.**

And a man of Banu Asad says ^{xxiv}:

**Do you not see that al-Ḥaqq, Musab, has died? ... We
buried him, and the wolf was entrusted with the trust.**

The lexical unit (al-mawt, "death") marked a turning point in the lives of these poets: from strength to weakness, and from joy to grief.

The poet, in self-address, recounts how death snatched away those who had been his support in life and against the calamities of fate. Here he is, in pain, lamenting his fortune after those of resolve, strength, patience, and truth have departed from him.

The word "death" in the previous testimonies stood out, employed along with its synonyms al-maniyya and al-muṣība, to indicate its horror. It signified the inevitable end of man. Since the certainty of death remains regardless of life's states and conditions, it is fitting for man according to these poets to die upon noble morals and virtues such as strength, courage, and truth.



- **Weeping in the Section of Elegies**

Faced with the enormity of calamities, the human soul constricts, finding no outlet except weeping. Tears flow down the cheeks, expressing the grief and sorrow within.

Since death is the greatest of calamities and the heaviest blow to man, weeping became the most effective release from its horror. This made poets express through the lexeme weeping their sorrows and grief. Abu Tammam noted this in many fragments, regarding it as a manifestation of sadness, which is indeed the very essence of elegy.

Abu al-Atahiyah says ^{xxv}:

I wept for you, my brother, with the tears of my eyes ... yet weeping for you availed me nothing.

A poet of Himyar says ^{xxvi}:

O my two friends, weep for me ... and announce to me the death of Abu Hujr.

Convey to me his weeping ... where the news itself cannot reach.

Şaliḥ ibn Abd al-Quddus says ^{xxvii}:

Is there not one to weep for the people of a quarter ... who lived in this world but have now left it?

Muslim ibn al-Walid says ^{xxviii}:

I saw the mourners, after long wailing ... forget, and what made them forget you was only remembrance.

From these testimonies, we observe that the lexeme weeping in its various forms was employed by poets in a real and literal sense, for the context indicates they were in states of grief that compelled them to weep, as an outlet for the soul's sorrows and burdens.

The central significance of weeping is its expression of the pain of separation separation that weighs heaviest upon

man when final, and that is only so in death. This is what appears in the preceding verses, where weeping among poets was bound to death, which severed kin and loved ones.

3. The Section of Old Age (al-Mashib)

One of the eloquent early Arab rhetoricians said: Youth is the first fruit of life, and the sweetest part of living is at its beginning, just as the best fruits are their first ripening. Nothing did the Arabs mourn more than youth, and nothing did the poets lament more than old age (mashib).^{xxix}

Youth is the stage of life at the peak of vigor and vitality, where man finds the pleasure of living thanks to his strength and ability to confront hardships and afflictions, not yielding to the terrors and trials that time brings.

Yet suddenly, while he is immersed in the abundance of youth, life is stripped away from him, and he finds himself enveloped by the specter of old age and decline, cloaked in gray hair. Strength is transformed into weakness, black hair into white, and hopes and dreams into sorrows.

Poets became keenly aware of this transformation in an individual's life, and they made the duality of youth and old age the axis of much of their poetry. They alternated between singing of youth and its sweetness, and weeping bitterly over the sudden attack of old age that struck them unawares.

This polarity was one of the reasons that led Abu Tammam to select thirteen poetic fragments under the section of al-Mashib. In them, the two lexical units youth and old age appeared as central motifs.

Abu Hilal al-Asadi says^{xxx}:



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**Old age descended and settled, with no resistance ... and
stripped youth of its covering.
Black locks mingled with their like ... white gleams upon
the temples side by side.
And when the two coexisted for a while ... the black
departed from the white and journeyed on.**

Another poet says ^{xxx}i:

**Alas, my sorrow for a youth ... that gray hairs have
trampled, and a once dark head now turned.
I was stripped of youth though once tender ... as a branch
is stripped of its leaves.
Oh, would that youth might return one day ... that I might
tell him what old age has done.**

A man of Tayy says ^{xxxii}:

**The nights shortened his stride and brought him near ...
time bent his back till it bowed.
He wore the garments of time in its many forms ... which
showed him its might and its weakness.
What of an old man whose flesh has withered ... who
consumed three turbans of different hues:
A deep black, a faded gray ... and at last a new pale white.
He longs for fair women, yet no longer ... does old age
permit desire for beauty.
And then comes death after all of this ... as though it were
meant for none but us.**

Abd Allah ibn Laqim al-Absi says ^{xxxiii}:

**I fled from gray hair as a camel flees ... as though none
had ever seen gray hair before me.
But mankind is nothing but one who perishes ... and
another who strays, as though he had already risen.**

al-Utbi said to be Umar ibn Abi Rabiah says ^{xxxiv}:

**When the maidens saw the gray upon my temples ... they
turned away from me with radiant cheeks.**

**They who, when they once beheld me or heard my name
... would hasten and crowd the lattices with their eyes.**

Another poet says ^{xxxv}:

**Youth is gone, never to be restored ... its joy has passed,
never to return.**

**Youth departed, and in its place there dwells ... an old
guest called 'gray age,' newly come.**

al-Harith ibn Habib al-Bahili says ^{xxxvi}:

**Oh, is there youth to be bought at any price? ... For a
thousand she-camels or a thousand noble steeds?**

**Is there any youth to be bought back after age ... as al-
Harith ibn Habib would ask?**

In these fragments, the binary opposition based on the two interrelated lexical units, "youth" and "old age (gray hair)," is revealed. The poets express their sorrow and the bitterness of losing youth, which has been replaced by gray hair that has overtaken the temples of their heads. They weep and lament what has become of them through this grayness, indicating that it is a sign of advanced age and that the life once filled with vitality and energy has passed away, never to return. Beauty has faded, the body has weakened, and they begin to perceive the end an end they had feared to hear of and pained to mention.

The departure of youth deprives poets of the company of maidens and the delight of women, who now turn away from them and avoid meeting them, instilling in their hearts disappointment and despair.

Abu Tammam found in these two lexical units a justification for his choice, one that fulfills the horizon of expectation in relation to one of the most genuine and



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profound emotions felt by people in general, and by poets in particular.

Conclusion and research findings

1. It has been shown that Abu Tammam was not merely a compiler of Arab poetry; rather, he exercised the act of selection with a conscious critical vision, which made Al-Ḥamasah a text of enduring intellectual and literary significance.
2. The didactic orientation appeared prominently in the three poetic themes he emphasized Heroism (Ḥamasah), Elegies, and Old Age where the text moved beyond its immediate purpose to convey a broader ethical and intellectual message.
3. The selections of **the Ḥamasah** section reflected a tendency to affirm values of courage, generosity, and steadfastness, in opposition to fear, cowardice, and weakness.
4. In the Elegies section, the selections transcended mere grief over loss to become exhortations and reminders of human mortality and the necessity of reflection.
5. The Old Age section carried a profound vision of time and death, making poetry a medium for philosophical contemplation and ascetic detachment from worldly concerns.
6. The study concluded that Al-Ḥamasah is not simply an anthology of selected poems, but rather a cultural and intellectual project that demonstrates Abu Tammam's ability to guide Arabic poetry toward serving human and social values.

References and Footnotes

- ⁱ Abu Tammam: *Al-Wahshiyyat*, p. 13.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ^{xii} Abu Tammam: *Al-Diwan*, vol. 2, pp. 225–230.
- ^{xiii} See: Halu, Aḥmad Abd al-Mun‘im: *Shu‘ara’ Tayy in al-Jahiliyyah wa-l-Islam, Akhbaruhum wa-Asharuhum*, Dar al-Kutub al-Waṭaniyyah, United Arab Emirates, 2012, 1st ed., p. 539.
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- ^{xv} al-Sha‘bani, Ibrahim Muḥammad Surhid: *Al-Shir al-Abbasi bayna Dawafi‘ al-Ibda‘ wa-Sulṭat al-Talaqqi*, pp. 51–52.
- ^{xvi} Ghazi Tūlaymat & Irfan al-Ashqar, *ibid.*, p. 195.
- ^{xvii} Abu Tammam: *Al-Wahshiyyat*, p. 128.



^{xviii} Ibid., p. 131.

^{xix} Ibid., pp. 131–132.

^{xx} Ibid., p. 132.

^{xxi} Ibid., p. 136.

^{xxii} Ibid., p. 139.

^{xxiii} Ibid., p. 141.

^{xxiv} Ibid., p. 146.

^{xxv} Ibid., p. 132.

^{xxvi} Ibid., p. 134.

^{xxvii} Ibid., p. 137.

^{xxviii} Ibid., p. 143.

^{xxix} al-Abhshi: *Al-Mustatraf fi Kull Fann Mustazraf*, Dar al-Ḥayah, Beirut, 1994, vol. 2, p. 6.

^{xxx} Abu Tammam: *Al-Waḥshiyyat*, p. 287.

^{xxxi} Ibid., p. 287.

^{xxxii} Ibid., p. 289.

^{xxxiii} Ibid., p. 289.

^{xxxiv} Ibid., p. 290.

^{xxxv} Ibid., p. 191.

^{xxxvi} Ibid., p. 192.