

"He Do the Police in Different Voices"¹: A Bakhtinian Take on Conversational Modes in some Modern British Poets

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"I am disappointed if a scene is carried through in the voice of the author rather than the voices of the characters."

Ivy Compton-Burnett to Margaret Jourdain (1945)

The need to resist monologism receives a resonant twentieth-century statement in the many discourses on the dialogic by Mikhail Bakhtin. In his perspective, doubleness is necessary to the freedom and cognitive power of imaginative writing, because art is always answerable to life, and life is a process of incessant change, which finds fulfilment "unconsummated" in time.² Like good conversation, "Man, properly speaking, is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted."³ In life as in art, the dialogic principle enables one to step outside the self into an otherness whose voicing represents an exchange between empathy and objectification.⁴ Conversation as the dialogic principle in action becomes more than a mere escape from the solipsistic self.⁵ It sustains the possibility of mediating experience as "an open event" with "cognitive-ethical directedness."⁶ For Bakhtin, conversation and life are, in this sense, based in non-identity, the freedom in which "A man never coincides with himself."⁷ Conversation as the agent of non-identity in speech becomes imperative as an antidote against the self-expressiveness latent to the lyric mode.⁸

Non-identity as a quasi-ethical imperative has the curious effect of converting opposition into a principle. In poems such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," W. B. Yeats offers us a modern version of an antinomical tradition at least as old as Andrew Marvell's dialogue

poems, in which abstract entities such as Created Pleasure and Resolved Soul clash elegantly over the inflexible positions they emblemize.

MY SELF

—and all these I set
 For emblems of the day against the tower
 Emblematical of the night,
 And claim as by a soldier's right
 A charter to commit the crime once more.

MY SOUL

Such fullness in that quarter flows
 And falls into the basin of the mind
 That man is stricken dumb and blind,
 For intellect no longer knows
 Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known—⁹

This form of dialogism has been described by Paul de Man in his classic lecture on "Lyric and Modernity" (1969) as internally self-divided about the notion of a self and of the language through which this divisive self finds self-expression:

Truly modern poetry is a poetry that has become aware of the incessant conflict that opposes a self . . . the conscious expression of a conflict within the function of language as representation and within the conception of language as the act of an autonomous self.¹⁰

At this point, we might pause briefly to reflect on the irony that in opposing the univocal, conversation in poetry practices its own artifice and parts company with the nature of conversation in life. In moving away from the narcissism inherent to solitary self-expression, conversation in poetry gives up on the free-wheeling, improvisatory and contingent or fortuitous quality of conversation as "familiar discourse or talk."¹¹ The whole point of conversation might be said to consist in not wanting to make any point. Hans-Georg Gadamer begins the third part of *Truth and Method* (1960) with this recognition:

We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more fundamental a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows what will "come out" in a conversation . . . All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that language used in it bears its own truth within it, i.e. that it reveals something which henceforth exists.¹²

Poems that subsidize the fiction of conversation cannot help underline the difference between conversation in life and its dissembling in poetry. Art—as Ivy Compton-Burnett once remarked—can hardly afford the luxury of the fortuitous, the random, and the contingent that are the province of life.¹³ The purposive drive acquired by conversation in poetry moves it in the direction of greater formality, metamorphosing the carefully studied illusion of the unstudied aspects of speech into an increasing acceptance of its own formalization. I will quickly illustrate this formalization through a number of poems which align themselves away from the spirit of conversation towards the kinds of diagonal oppositionality which have created the traditions of the poem as debate, catechism, colloquy and dialogue.

My second example is taken from F. T. Prince's "A Byron-Shelley Conversation," and like his "Not a *Paris Review* Interview" from *Later on* (1983),¹⁴ it shows the tradition of formalized dialogue disguised as an extended conversation after the fashion of Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-29, 1853). This is how his Byron talks to his Shelley:

Bloodshed in war
 And massacre . . .
 . . . for those who would believe
 like you, man could achieve
 perfection, and be free,

what can the spectacle
be, but damnation?

And here is Shelley to Byron:

Communists make me
The true revolutionary,
You a mere rebel—

See you as mainly bored,
And much the lord.
(And surely they can tell
you would bemoan
their orderly sad Hell.)

Here the fiction of conversation holds, but barely, because each voice offers a position that is placed in a diagonal relation to the other. They intersect without exchange and without the likelihood of change. In such situations difference merely affirms itself through various reiterations arranged in static alternation.

Another kind of formalization undergone by conversation in poetry can be illustrated from the poem in question-and-answer format, as in my third example, R. S. Thomas's "Revision":

So the catechism begins:
'Who are you?'
'I don't know.'
'Who gave you that ignorance?'
'It is the system that, when two people
meet, they combine to produce
the darkness in which the self
is born, a wick hungering
for its attendant flame.'
 'What will that
Do for you?'
'Do for me? It is the echo
of a promise I am meant
to believe in.'
'Repeat that promise.'
'Whoever believes in this fire,
although he lives, he shall die.'¹⁵

My fourth example shows another variant, an extrapolation from the convention of dramatic stichomythia, R. S. Thomas's "Nocturne by Ben Shahn," which begins:

'Why look at me like that?'
 'Well—it's your hand on the guitar.'
 'Don't touch it; there is fire in it.'
 'But why doesn't it burn you?'
 'It does, it does; but inside me.'
 'I see no smoke at your nostrils.'
 'But I see green leaves at your lips.'¹⁶

My fifth example arranges its conversation as a quick and laconic play of answer-and-response, Adrian Mitchell's "Questionnaire," which begins:

Q. How do you do?
 A. Like a bear in the Zoo.
 Q. Why should that be?
 A. The world is not free.
 Must it always be so?
 A. No.

And ends:

Q. But how do you do?
 A. Like a bear who dreams he is not in a Zoo.¹⁷

Such poems take conversation into the partially overlapping zone of dialogue, where the fiction of two voices moves from the meeting or intersection of two minds to the clash of two ideologies.

I would now like to turn to a more complex poem that derives from the nineteenth century tradition of dramatic monologue, but complicates it by using the fiction of voices in conversation for dramatizing the internal divisions of a single consciousness in two minds about itself. Philip Hobsbaum has argued that the dramatic monologue may signal "a failure in the dramatic tradition."¹⁸ One

might add that the popularity of the monologue has been the bane of conversation in poetry, because its plurality of voices gives up on the engagement of two or more persons, and turns instead to kinds of division within a single speaker, such as the disjunction between predisposition to utterance and the actual utterance, the disjunction between utterance and concurrent inner thought or disposition, and the disjunction between the actual utterance and afterthought. Nevertheless, monologue and conversation poem share the feature of presenting the reader with alternative interpretations or attitudes which resist unity, so that the fiction of conversation continues to serve as a metaphor for the need to be taken outside the self. We can call such poems "shadow-dialogues."¹⁹

One of the most illuminating recent examples of this type provides my sixth example, Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude," which combines the fiction of conversation with the poetic equivalent of what drama presents as an "aside," the comic book as the "thought-bubble" and cinema as the "voice-over" effect. A prostitute who works as a part-time nude model engages the painter in idle conversation while she reflects on the experience of being painted. The poem is constituted out of the implied figurative dialogue between the desultory conversation and her continuous and concurrent self-reflexivity. The convention of art draws the reader into this disjunction between words and thoughts, as a third and silent witness to both the external exchange and the internal colloquy. We thus get to hear all that she does, and to understand more than either she or he:

... He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint. Little man,
you've not the money for the arts I sell.
Both poor, we make our living how we can.

I ask him, Why do you do this? Because
I have to. There's no choice. Don't talk.
My smile confuses him. These artists
take themselves too seriously When it's finished

he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say
Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like me.²⁰

The poem engages simultaneously in more than one type of conversation. As Ian Gregson remarks, monologue combines with dialogue, and dialogue with the dialogic. Each effect depends for its success on the capacity to surprise one voice with another.²¹

Another, very minimal and witty form of shadowing can be illustrated in the type of poem which formalizes conversation into a simple but forceful pattern. My seventh example is taken from the second section of Thom Gunn's long poem "Misanthropos" (1965). It exploits the motif of the echo that is always more or less than a true echo. In Arthur Golding's charming version of the story of Narcissus and Echo, each utterance by the foolish boy gets a plaintive diminuendo from the languishing nymph Echo:

Now when she saw *Narcissus* stray about the Forrest wyde,
She waxed warme and step for step fast after him she hyde.
. . . .
By chaunce the stripling being strayed from all his companie,
Sayde: is there any bodie nie? Straight *Echo* answered: I.
Amazde he castes his ey aside, and looketh round about,
And come (that all the Forrest roong) aloud he calleth out.
And come (sayth she:) he looketh backe, and seeing no man followe,
Why fliste, he cryeth once againe: and she the same doth hallowe.
He still persistes, and wondring much what kinde of thing it was
From which that answering voice turne so duely seemed to passe,
Sayd: let us joyne. She (by hir will desirous to have said,
In faith with none more willing at any time or stead)
Sayd: let us joyne
He runnes his way, and will not be imbraced of no such.
And sayth: I first will die ere thou shalt take of me thy pleasure.
She answered nothing else thereto, but take of me thy pleasure²²

One of Gunn's literary heroes—Yvor Winters—was a great admirer of Golding's device, and Gunn provides a neat variation, in which the echo is derived from a diminished form of the preceding utterance, but with changed inflection:

At last my shout is answered! Are you near,
Man whom I cannot see but can hear?

Here.

The canyon hides you well, which well defended.
Sir, tell me, is the long war ended?

Ended.

I passed no human on my trip, a slow one.
Is it your luck, down there, to know one?

No one.

What have I left, who stood among mankind,
When the firm base is undermined?

A mind.

Yet, with a vacant landscape as its mirror,
What can it choose, to ease the terror?

Error.

Is there no feeling, then, that I can trust,
In spite of what we have discussed?

Disgust.²³

The succession of hollow questions is cauterized by a punning diminution in which mimicry is no mere diminishment. It refracts what it appears to echo, so that the intent of each question is set right by a minimalist tangent. The reading experience enacts an inversion of Golding's Echo and her dependency on the solipsist Narcissus.

The next part of my argument turns to the difficulty conversation has in approximating to communication. Like the many voices in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which Calvin Bedient describes as "a crisis of heteroglossia,"²⁴ in such poems utterance can intend conversation without quite achieving it. In my eighth example, Edwin Morgan presents this difficulty under the Bakhtinian or Rabelaisian aspect of laughter. In a surreal encounter between the mummy of Rameses II and Mme Saunier-Seité, who welcomes the mummy to Paris, hilarious miscommunication becomes an essential part of the poem's carnivalesque.

—I hope the flight from Cairo was reasonable.

—Mmmmm.

—We have a germ-proof room at the Museum of Man
where we trust your Majesty will have peace and quiet.

—Unh-unh.

—I am sorry, but this is necessary.
Your Majesty's person harbours a fungus.

—Fng, fng's hn?

The macabre conversation proceeds through allusions to Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the absence of women in the tomb to a final exchange in which the alarmed curator exclaims at the frantic mummy tearing off its bandages:

—Your Majesty, Your Majesty! You'll break your stitches!

—Fng st'chez fng's wrm hm.²⁵

Linguistic incoherence neither dampens nor obscures the rejuvenation of lust as the comic thrust of the poem. In what is also a kind of conversation between poems, Morgan adds a post-script to Andrew Marvell's conflation of the themes of *carpe diem* and the *memento mori*:

The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.²⁶

Most poems that use conversation to dramatize the difficulty of communication are less facetious than the Morgan poem. But worlds can still stand divided in exchanges that read as more than dialogue while remaining less than conversation, as in the comic poignancy of my ninth example, Henry Reed's *Lessons of the War* (1946). The sequence dramatizes a disjunction between the voice of an Army instructor and a genteel, educated civilian. To begin with, the reader is lulled into supposing that each poem in the sequence is voiced by the

instructor preparing civilians for war. But when he puts a mildly sarcastic question to one of his less attentive recruits, the rejoinder becomes an antiphonal drift in muted contrariness.

You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:
 At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
 Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
 Don't call the *bleeders* sheep.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of example,
 The one at the end, asleep, endeavours to tell us
 What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
 After first having come to attention. There to the west,
 On the fields of summer the sun and shadows bestow
 Vestments of purple and gold.²⁷

The shift in voice remains uninflected, in correspondence to the bemused and reluctant tone of the civilian's reverie. The instructor remains oblivious of the subvocalization, which subverts its own protest by accepting marginalization.

Further along the spectrum of partial or oblique communication, we get exchanges that are at odds with themselves, which add up to less than dialogue while they remain more than conversation, as in my tenth example, the first section of Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1972):

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5:
 architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the
 summer heritage in Holy Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron
 Bridge: contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-changer:
 commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.

'I like that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.'²⁸

Here, two voices speak neither *with* nor *against* each other. The obvious difference in style and tone—inflated rhetoric undercut by laconic casualness—goes hand-in-hand with an outward conjunction of wills. The servant is annunciatory in tone, but if he speaks tongue-in-cheek, he does so without biting his tongue, though the poem

remains two-faced about the attitude to authority endorsed by the exchange. Self-effaced, the servant provides a face for his master. His utterance is directed at all and sundry, though it speaks only of, and to, its subject. The master discovers the novelty and pleasure of being made the subject of splendid nominations. That the splendour resides less in the master than in the servant's mastery in nomination gives the litany of praise its contexture of comic dispraise. Naming is fun, and calling names can be funny, and though King Offa might be neither, even he might see the joke. The poem as speech-act constitutes disjuncture as the basis for cognition not merely in the polarization of styles and implied attitudes but in opening up the possibility that such doublings are inherent to the contemplative mind. The poem then becomes—in Stevens's phrase—"the act of the mind,"²⁹ but specifically as a mind in several voices about itself, where the notion of mind conflates poet, reader, and fictive protagonist.

In Hill's poem, the differences in linguistic register dramatize the potential for conflict between language and power, power and identity. By foregrounding this in and as language, Hill also shows how a poem can circumvent the limitations that Bakhtin (pre-judicially) ascribes to poetry:

The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts and doubts remain in the object, in thoughts, in living experiences—in short, in the subject matter—but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even the discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted.³⁰

Bakhtin is rhetorical in his assertion of doubt that it is possible to find poems in which conversation represents a discourse that can be doubted. Yet that is precisely what is done in my final example, "Dialogue on the Headland," in which Robert Graves presents a conversation between two lovers. The poem's intertextual force deflates the rhetoric we associate with the tradition of Robert Burns's "My love is like a red, red rose." The more hyperbolic one voice gets in its asseverations, the more doubt opens up like a vertiginous abyss

before the lovers and their desire for transcendence—not from time, but—their own fear of frailty in love:

- SHE: You'll not forget these rocks and what I told you?
 HE: How could I? Never: whatever happens.
 SHE: What do you think might happen?
 Might you fall out of love?—did you mean that?
 HE: Never, never! 'Whatever' was a sop
 For jealous listeners in the shadows.
 SHE: You haven't answered me. I asked:
 'What do you think might happen?'
 HE: Whatever happens: though the skies should fall
 Raining their larks and vultures in our laps
 SHE: 'Though the seas turn to slime'—say that
 'Though water-snakes be hatched with six heads.'
 HE: Though the seas turn to slime, or tower
 In an arching wave above us, three miles high
 SHE: 'Though she should break with you'—dare you say that?
 'Though she deny her words on oath.'³¹

They go on in this vein for a while, but the end of the poem brings them no closer—nor leaves them any farther—than when they began this ritual exorcism of doubt. Conversation progresses here only in the paradoxical sense of opening up the recognition that their love cannot overcome the doubt they are overcome by. Conversation speaks here as poetry only of the truth of doubts that cannot be doubted, of affirmations that cannot confirm assent through speech. The only affirmation speech can make in this secular version of a negative theology is to persist in the kind of conversation that brings out the colours of silence as speech. The poetry of conversation thus reaches a limit. Language concedes to what cannot be redressed through language, before which we still continue with the effort to converse.

Put another way, if conversation is the exchange of speech in an economy of surplus, poetry is the recession of language in which dialogue dissembles conversation in order that meaning remain outside the agency of the interlocutor while apparently contained within the field of possibility circumscribed by the author. The will of the author, when it presents dialogue as a fiction of conversation,

constitutes a form of intentionality. What this will intends is difference in consciousness. The intersection of speech-acts becomes an embodiment of this will to difference, and the conventions of genre ground this difference as meaning. When this intersection stretches beyond that will, but within that genre, we have dialogue revert to the state of conversation, a surplus beyond the initiating economy of authorial intent. That is why someone like Bakhtin looked to the literary text for a space in which difference in discourse—difference as discourse—could acquire what we might call its perlocutionary force.³² He purported to find this scope at its most sustained in the novel; we can find it at its most elemental in the form of the short poem. Michael Holquist links the contrast between Bakhtin's imperative to dialogue as difference and the Kant of the chapter devoted to schematization that opens the *Analytic of Principles* in the *First Critique*. Kant there invokes "a third thing, which must stand in homogeneity with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other."³³ For Holquist, the need for such thirdness corresponds to the ground that must be taken as shareable when two consciousnesses meet, whether in conversation or dialogue, "Knowing that between ourselves and the world there is no direct connection but only a highly mediated relation."³⁴ Conversation, or its semblance in the text as dialogue, is the form such mediation takes in poetry.

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NOTES

¹T. S. Eliot's borrowing from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Bk. 1, Cp. 16 for the early version reproduced in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971).

²Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990) 13.

³Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 364.

⁴*Art and Answerability* 212; *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. and ed. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: U of Texas P, 1993, 14). Cf. "What is necessary is an essential point of support in meaning *outside* the context of my own life . . . in order to be able to remove the act of experiencing from the unitary and unique event of my own life" (*Art and Answerability* 113).

⁵"One must come to feel at home in the world of other people, in order to go on from confession . . . to the world as a beautiful given" (*Art and Answerability* 111).

⁶*Art and Answerability* 98.

⁷Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 59.

⁸"The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of *not coinciding*—of not coinciding *in principle*—with me myself as a given" (*Art and Answerability* 127).

⁹"A Dialogue of Self and Soul," *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1989) 348-51.

¹⁰Paul de Man, "Lyric and Modernity," *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1983) 171.

¹¹OED, "conversation," n. 7.a. Cf. 2.: "The action of consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy," and 5.: "Circle of acquaintance, company, society," and 7.c.: "small talk." However, 8. goes some way towards blurring the distinction between conversation and dialogue: "A public conference, discussion or debate," as do the OED's 1.a. and 1.b. for "dialogue."

¹²Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960, 2nd ed. 1965; trans. 1975, rpt. New York: Crossroad, 1982) 345.

¹³Ivy Compton-Burnett interviewed by Margaret Jourdain: "As regards plots I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots." *Orion: A Miscellany*, Vol. 1 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1945) rpt. In Charles Burckhart, *The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (London: Gollancz, 1972).

¹⁴F. T. Prince, *Collected Poems 1935-1992* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993) 231-44, 247-53 resp.

¹⁵R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993) 492-93.

¹⁶R. S. Thomas, 231.

¹⁷Adrian Mitchell, *Blue Coffee: Poems 1985-1996* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996) 15.

¹⁸Philip Hobsbaum, *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979) 234.

¹⁹Vincent Crapanzano, "On Dialogue," *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tullio Maranhão (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 269-91, here 289.

²⁰Carol Ann Duffy, "Standing Female Nude," *Standing Female Nude* (London: Anvil Press, 1985) 46.

²¹Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Engagement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 101-02.

²²Arthur Golding (trans.), *The Metamorphoses* (1565; London: The Centaur Press, 1961) 72 (Book III, ll. 461-88).

²³Thom Gunn, "Misanthropos," *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1993) 134. I am grateful to my colleague John W. Phillips for drawing my attention to this poem.

²⁴Calvin Bedient, *He Do The Police In Different Voices: 'The Waste Land' and Its Protagonists* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 9.

²⁵Edwin Morgan, "The Mummy," *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985) 98-99.

²⁶Andrew Marvell "To his Coy Mistress," *The Selected Poetry of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: The New American Library, 1967) 76.

²⁷Henry Reed, "Judging Distances," "Lessons of the War, 2," *Collected Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 50.

²⁸Geoffrey Hill, *New and Collected Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) 93.

²⁹Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," *Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1997) 218-19.

³⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P 1981) 286.

³¹Robert Graves, *Selected Poems*, ed. with an introduction by Paul O'Prey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 174-75.

³²J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1962) 98-101.

³³Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 272.

³⁴Michael Holquist, "Afterword: A Two-Faced Hermes," "Bakhtin/'Bakhtin': Studies in the Archive and Beyond," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97 (1998): 781-90, here 786.