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BORROWING WELSHNESS: WILD WALES, AFFILIATION AND IDENTITY

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Somewhat appropriately, considering the eccentric and dream-like style of much of his writing, George Henry Borrow's name appears fitfully in mainstream literary, cultural and historical studies. The largely autodidact travel writer, essayist, and translator was born in Norfolk, but his family moved around Britain with his father's job as an army recruiting officer, including a short spell in Huddersfield. He was a popular writer in the nineteenth century, and cheap editions of his works, particularly those which focused on Gypsies, such as *Lavengro* (1851) and *The Romany Rye* (1857), have continued to be produced ever since, serving the demand for nostalgic accounts of Britain's Romani population. Borrow also travelled widely in Europe while working for the British and Foreign Bible Society, and two of his other well-known works are *The Bible in Spain* (1843) and *The Zincali* (1841), also about the Romani. Academic attention to his oeuvre has been more sporadic. However, as the field of study concerned with the figure of the 'Gypsy' has developed since the late 1980s (with the help of postcolonial theorisations of racial difference), Borrow's work has been the subject of re-readings.¹ In the light of these reconsiderations, particularly that of Deborah Epstein Nord, this essay discusses the ways in which Borrow uses an affiliation with both Welsh and Romani cultures to shape his own sense of self on the page.

Borrow made the trip detailed in *Wild Wales: The People, Language and Scenery* (published 1862) in 1854, when he was 51, with his wife and step-daughter, Henrietta – though this was not his first visit to the country. Nord has noted the unenthusiastic attitude towards this Welsh odyssey of one of Borrow's later-century fans, Theodore Watts-Dunton, who considered the presence of his family to be inhibiting, particularly as he had previously viewed Borrow as something of a sexual bohemian.² He was certainly not the first Victorian writer to publish a Welsh travelogue; his text and, for example, George Bennett's *The Tourist's Guide Through North Wales* (1853) and Thomas Roscoe's, *Wanderings and Excursions in South Wales* (1854) follow much earlier travel texts such as John Torbuck's mid-eighteenth-century *A Collection of Welsh Travels and Memoirs of Wales*, though all three

¹ See, for example, Deborah Epstein Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Ian Duncan, 'Wild England: George Borrow's Nomadology', *Victorian Studies*, 41: 3 (1998), 381–403 and David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities 1500–2000: From Egyptians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

² Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination*, 75.

are significantly politer about their subject than was Torbuck.³ R. Merfyn Jones has described *Wild Wales* as being 'effusive to the point of embarrassment',⁴ but this essay contends that those moments of what we might call Saxon cultural cringe are the result of Borrow's affiliative ethnography, with 'affiliation' being a contested term.

In terms of Borrow's Romani writings, the eponymous Lavengro's bohemianism is, proposes Nord, part of an Oedipal struggle with the 'masculine efficacy of his father'. She sees Borrow's autobiographical character opting out of the constraints of bourgeois expectations, giving up 'on both worldly success and heterosexual union to roam in solitary fashion the forests and dingles of Britain'. She suggests that the struggle is overcome by his triumph with language (as 'linguistic desire seems to replace all other forms') and brotherhood with the Gypsies. It is 'association' that is achieved, a connection with others that emphasises 'neither inheritance nor reproduction'.⁵ Two models for the construction of identity thus emerge from readings of Borrow's texts: an orthodox model based on reproduction and inheritance (we reproduce the social structure which has engendered us), rendered legible through manifestations of heterosexual desire – ideologically policed versions of which generationally maintain the social status quo, and a more subversive, bohemian model based on affiliation. I suggest that Borrow's identity in *Wild Wales* draws on both the models that frame his earlier work (and Nord elaborates a complex interrelationship of conservatism and unconventionality in *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*). While Borrow is certainly keen to demonstrate that he amounts to more than his national and familial heritage, his work is also marked by sexual desire, even if its fulfilment is written between the lines; this manifestation of the reproductive model of identity does not negate the powerful potential for identities of fraternity, association and affiliation in the texts. In terms of literary history, Borrow's work begets not only a group of later-century writers (including Watts-Dunton), according to Lou Charnon-Deutsch 'Guiseppe Verdi's Azucena, Prosper Mérimée's Carmen, Ambroise Thomas's Mignon, George Eliot's Fedalma, George Sand's Moréna, and Victor Hugo's Esmeralda all owe something to Borrow's picaresque imagination'.⁶ Similarly, Borrow's writing on Wales has spawned successors for generations and, while his work does not neatly reproduce the discourse of penetration which has a tradition in European travel writing, and his flirtation with his interlocutors might be seen as an eruption of the substitutive linguistic desire to which Nord points, not many chapters go by without a commentary on buxom Welsh girls and stately Welsh women. Whatever Watts-Dunton thought, Borrow's ardour seems undampened by Mary's presence in Llangollen. Yet the possibilities for an identity shaped by affiliation as well as reproduction (of class expectations, of national identity, of language

³ G. J. Bennett's *The Tourist's Guide Through North Wales* (London: Whittaker, 1853); Thomas Roscoe, *Wanderings and Excursions in South Wales, with the Scenery of the River Wye* (London: Bohn, 1854); John Torbuck, *A Collection of Welsh Travels and Memoirs of Wales* (London: Torbuck, 1738).

⁴ R. Merfyn Jones, 'Beyond Identity? The Reconstruction of the Welsh', *Journal of British Studies*, 31: 4 (1992), 330-357 (331).

⁵ Nord, *Gypsies and British Imagination*, 13, 86, 91.

⁶ Lou Charnon-Deutsch, *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 15.

and culture) abide, and this essay proceeds to consider some of them, seeing the reproductive and affiliative models supplementing each other.

In his history of New Zealanders, James Belich uses the term 'Smithing' to refer to a process of constructing Maori history, based on the work of European scribes such as S. Percy Smith who derived a coherent narrative from disparate origin myths from different tribes.⁷ Taking my lead from Belich (and seeing as the writer in question has a similarly appropriate verbifiable name), in this article I refer to a process of 'Borrowing', when Borrow distinctively constructs an exotic, authentic, noble and eccentric Welshness to match his own self-image. The word is an apposite one as the writer Borrows the constructions he shapes for his own writerly persona. Throughout his work, Borrow deliberately blurs the generic boundary between autobiography and fiction, calling *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, for example, a 'dream, or drama' as well as 'a philological book, a poem', at the same time describing a personal history for Lavengro that corresponds closely with Borrow's own.⁸ In Wales, his moves towards a biography of a people say far more about Borrow's attempts to articulate who he is.

This is not to say that it is by any means a straightforward task to identify in the pages of *Wild Wales* who (or what) Borrow thought he was. His pride in what we would today call his 'university of life' education is everywhere evident, particularly his apparent skill at mastering languages from speaking with natives of those tongues and reading as much literature in the language as possible. He may have learnt Welsh from a lowly groom while he was a young boy, but George Hyde considers him to have been 'much better equipped for the job of spokesman for "the Celtic element in literature"' than was Oxford Professor of Poetry, Matthew Arnold. Hyde probably goes too far when he says that there is 'not a trace' of the 'prevailing Victorian sentimentality' in Borrow's approach to Celticism, but it is certainly true that Borrow was as interested in the living Wales, however much he idealised aspects of it, as he was in the ancient bards and kings.⁹ The same can be said for his approach to the Romani people of Britain in *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, where his enthusiasm for family politics and horse-trading is as great as for the origins of the Romani language, which is now 'broken, corrupted, and half in ruins', and their diasporic roots.¹⁰ His representations may revel in anachronism, but his writing is not quite the proleptic elegy of his later nineteenth-century followers. Not only this, Borrow's status as a traveller and with an interest in other outsiders causes him to paint a picture of the diverse society in mid-nineteenth-century Wales and its borders. He meets a former slave from Antigua in Chester, Irish tinkers, hears of the Welsh Gypsies, meets American visitors, Welshmen who have travelled to Chile, the English who have moved to Wales and live quietly with Welsh wives (often speaking no Welsh) and, in Holyhead: 'strolling about the

⁷ James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland and London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1996), 24.

⁸ George Borrow, *Lavengro* (London: Dent, 1961), 1; *The Romany Rye* (London: Dent, 1961), 368.

⁹ George Hyde, 'George Henry Borrow', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, first published 2005, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=490>.

¹⁰ Borrow, *Lavengro*, 112.

market-place I came in contact with a fellow dressed in a turban and dirty blue linen robes and trowsers'. This encounter obviously inspires him, as he comments: 'the town, with its white houses placed by the seaside, on the skirt of a mountain, beneath a blue sky and a broiling sun, put me something in mind of a Moorish piratical town, in which I had once been'.¹¹ Holyhead, however appealing, is rarely thus described.

Borrow considers himself a master of the Welsh language, and is fond of beginning conversations with strangers in English to see how often he will be met with the response, 'Dim Saesneg', perhaps all the better to impress his interlocutors when he converses in 'the other tongue'.¹² Other and peculiar to the outsider it may ostensibly be, but it is a mode of communication that he happily borrows when striding out amongst the Welsh hills, alone or with a native guide. His self-confidence in these borrowings jars with the modern, more culturally-sensitive reader but they are, I suggest, a manifestation of his desire to be *of* a people. Borrow seems unaware of the paradox that in learning a language and apparently 'passing' as Welsh he undermines his own conceptions of the authenticity of a culture which, his texts tell us, are rooted in that culture's tongue. He does not consider Wrexham to be properly Welsh, for instance, as most of its inhabitants seem to speak only English. Walking towards Rhiwabon, he experiences his first "Dim Saesneg" of the journey and thinks: 'This is as it should be. [...] I now feel I am in Wales'.¹³

Another favourite strategy of Borrow's is to test the literary or poetic knowledge of the people he meets, hoping to impress and surprise them with his own wide reading and experience of the person's culture. Indeed, *Wild Wales* itself has something of an anthologic quality as it contains many of Borrow's translations of Welsh poems. After one such incident, when he asks a man if he has read Ellis Wynne's *Gweledigaetnau y bardd Cwsg* or *Visions of the Sleeping Bard*, published in 1703 (a translation of which by Borrow was published in 1860) his interlocutor asks how it is that he 'can read Welsh without being a Welshman?'.¹⁴ For Lavengro, conversations with Armenians ('In the name of all that is wonderful, how came you to know aught of my language?') and Romani ('well, I like you all the better for talking Rommany')¹⁵ often follow the same structure, though approval of his skill is not universal: Lavengro's knowledge of Romani gets him poisoned by a woman who fears the consequences of a largely unknown language being written down. Borrow is never slow to note how impressed people are with his mastery of their language, such as when he recalls how he 'spoke some Welsh to [some children] which appeared to give them great satisfaction'.¹⁶ Borrow, then, seems to advertise his linguistic skill at every possible opportunity in a kind of lexical one-upmanship. He seeks to wrong-foot them if they should dare to doubt his ability, and is frequently patronising. For instance, he says to a woman in the Tafarn Tywarch where Borrow and his companion dine: 'pray leave us to our

¹¹ Borrow, *Wild Wales* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1970), 219-20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ Borrow, *Lavengro*, 254; 379.

¹⁶ Borrow, *Wild Wales*, 60.

breakfast, and the next time you feel inclined to talk nonsense about no Englishman's understanding Welsh, or knowing anything of Welsh matters, remember that it was an Englishman who told you the Welsh word for salmon'.¹⁷ He holds the position of one with knowledge and power, but one should also remember Nord's assertion that 'the *teaching* of language functions as erotic expression' for Borrow.¹⁸ He is also fond of putting words in people's mouths – a problematically forceful act, considering the significance of language here. On being told by a woman that she does not actively dislike the English 'whatever they did of old', he says 'but you still consider them [...] the seed of Y Sarfes cadwynog, the coiling serpent'. She is shocked by the strength of these words, especially as she is on her way home from Chapel, and replies 'I should be loth to call any people the seed of the serpent'. In trying to empathise with the Welsh view, he has gone too far. There are, surprisingly, some redemptory features to these engagements, however conceited they at first appear. First, Borrow enjoys the rhetorical skirmish, flirtatiously dancing around and teasing his conversation partner. If Borrow's role in the discussions is reframed as gently provocative rather than supercilious, they become less politically questionable. It is an oft-commented on quality of Borrow's writing that it is hard to pin down and, for the critic, many of the incidents can be read as flirtatious or domineering or both, depending on how much benefit of the doubt one is determined to offer him. Second, it seems he genuinely wishes to know how widely particular poems and myths are known and is particularly keen to demonstrate what a feeling for poetry and other civilized traits the working-class Welshman has.

There are three notable instances of this plebophilism in *Wild Wales*. After a discourse on Celtic poets, Borrow comments to his wife on the difference 'between a Welshman and an Englishman of the lower class. What would a Suffolk miller's swain have said if I had repeated to him verses out of Beowulf or even Chaucer, and had asked him about the residence of Skelton'. The Borrowing of a Welsh poetic sensibility and civilized nature can be seen in action, as the author seems to take a pride in the people with whom he has surrounded himself, as if he was in fact one of them. Similarly, he comments on 'a scene in a public-house, yes! but in a Welsh public-house. Only think of a Suffolk toper repeating the death-bed verses of a poet; surely there is a considerable difference between the Celt and the Saxon'. Borrow insists on using the term 'Saxon' to refer to the English, deliberately excising some of his least favourite people, the French, from the country's history and language. Nonetheless, it is not with the Saxons that Borrow wishes to align himself here; he borrows Welshness. Finally, he wishes to proclaim 'honour to the kind hospitable Celts in general! How different is the reception of this despised race of the wandering stranger from that of ---. However, I am a Saxon myself, and the Saxons have no doubt their virtues; a pity that they should be all uncouth and ungracious ones!'¹⁹ He names himself Saxon, but does not own this identity. Further, he sees some innate generosity and civility in Welshness, particularly manifested in the least-educated, most

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸ Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination*, 88.

¹⁹ Borrow, *Wild Wales*, 107; 120; 175.

deprived people. That it is to be found here seems to demonstrate, for Borrow, its authenticity and increased desirability in his eyes (having a hatred of affectation and 'gentility').

A further redemptory feature of Borrow's exploratory conversations is that he reveals the moments where he is not master of them. This is part of his attempt to mark himself as an outsider, and therefore in a position to identify with a people that the English consider other – even if his exclusion is from the very group to which he hopes to gain access. As he turns to leave one of his encounters, he notes the behaviour of the man to whom he has been speaking: 'when he rejoined his companions he said something to them in Welsh, at which they all laughed'.²⁰ There is no need for Borrow to include this detail, other than to emphasize his subordinate position as the encounter concludes. Similarly, on an occasion when Borrow orders a pint of ale in Welsh: 'the girl stared, but went away apparently to fetch it'.²¹ Borrow usually interprets such incidents as people being in awe of his language skills, or considering him an exotic visitor. They might also be read, however, as individuals struggling to understand him. Borrow's own representation leaves the skills of which he is so proud open to question. His tone is, in general, uncomfortably condescending, such as his reply to a man recounting the history/myth of Madoc, son of Owain Gwynedd and said to have discovered America. The man asserts that "his people are still to be found in a part of America speaking the pure iaith Cymraeg better Welsh than we of Wales do." "That I doubt," said [Borrow]. "However, the idea is a pretty one; therefore cherish it."²² Borrow recognises the importance of national myths, but need not frame it quite like this. On the other hand, there are some beliefs, such as in the appearance of corpse candles that foretell death, on which he does not comment. It is hard to discern whether this is because he credits the tales with some veracity, or because he respects the nature of belief itself rather than the specific content of it. While he staunchly opposes any organised religion that is not the Church of England, he has more truck with folk beliefs. Whichever it is, these moments, like those where Borrow opens himself to mockery, break a path for affiliation with the people he describes. *Wild Wales* can be comical, and there are instances where it is difficult to know how droll Borrow is being, or whether the retelling is unintentionally humorous to the twenty-first-century reader. For example, his wife, who had asked to be taken to fashionable Harrogate but instead got Llangollen, takes her husband to meet Jones the shopkeeper who is interested to know of Borrow's curiosity about the Welsh people and language. They begin to talk linguistics and literature, and 'after some minutes my wife got up and left us'.²³ The reader is not at all surprised, but also amused and I wonder if Borrow is deliberately poking fun at himself. The same happens near Beddgelert: when he encounters a dog, whose owner says 'Down, Perro'. "Perro!"

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

²¹ Ibid. 91.

²² Ibid., 63.

²³ Ibid., 96.

said I; “why do you call the dog Perro?”. The answer soon comes: “We call him Perro,” said the man, “because his name is Perro.”²⁴

Borrow’s problematically superior tone, then, is undermined by the comical, the droll and the mocking. He does not always stand apart from the people he studies, becoming immersed in their landscapes and lives and taking the risk of leaving himself open to ridicule and abuse, and hopes to use his linguistic skill and adventurism to gain access to closed communities. Borrow does not explicitly aim to enlighten the rest of the world to the language and practices of the Welsh and, throughout his oeuvre, the Romani. Biographically, we might interpret his transgressive forays as him replaying a desire to enter echelons of society from which he is excluded, but more straightforwardly Borrow describes his success at gaining entry for his own satisfaction, as an opportunity to show off his self-taught multilingualism and to highlight ‘linguistic cosmopolitanism’.²⁵ The result of this access, its retelling and publication is, however, to reveal a hidden world as surely as any ethnographer’s work does. Not only does Lavengro face the ire of Mrs Herne for making known the language of the roads, he meets with opprobrium from several characters in *Wild Wales* on learning that he can understand them: ‘I will tell you plainly that we don’t like to have strangers among us who understand our discourse, more especially if they be gentlefolks’.²⁶ Intriguingly in terms of Borrow’s strategies for identity construction, the success of infiltrating a closed community relies on his being other than it – he must be an outsider to demonstrate skill at getting in. It is an identification that relies on difference from, rather than sameness to, the Welsh (or Romani). He wishes to stand side by side these people, but does so from a position that reproduces his Englishness. A similar paradox emerges in Lavengro’s dream of an uncorrupted version of the Romani language, a language whose purity would also have prevented him from understanding it, keeping it a ‘strange secret’.²⁷ On his way to Machynlleth, Borrow meets an immigrant Englishwoman who describes her family as being ‘poor lone creatures in a strange land, without a soul to speak to but one another. [... The Welsh] take good care that we shouldn’t pick up a word of their language’.²⁸ While Borrow is obvious proof that this is not always the case, and meets with as many people who are delighted that he has learnt Welsh as he does those that despise him for it, his position is, nonetheless, more akin to the Englishwoman’s than with the people they have both travelled amongst.

Analogously, one of the ways in which Borrow demonstrates his enthusiasm for a culture is frustration at its participants’ casual casting off of language or traditional practices in the service of what Borrow calls ‘gentility’. It seems that he, as an outsider, appreciates the value of the culture more than those to whom it more properly belongs. We see this in *The Romany Rye* when Mrs Petulengro tries to pass Romani words off as French, and reported by a respectable dame’ at Valle Crucis Abbey: ‘Welsh people at the present

²⁴ Ibid., 230.

²⁵ Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination*, 72.

²⁶ Borrow, *Lavengro*, 376; *Wild Wales*, 485.

²⁷ Borrow, *Romany Rye*, 82.

²⁸ Borrow, *Wild Wales*, 373.

day were so full of fine airs that they were above speaking the old language'.²⁹ As a philologist who yearns for the vocabulary of Welsh and Romani, Borrow absents himself from a group who can choose whether they speak it or let it die. Borrow's vocation is to keep rare languages active as living archives; this does not make him a 'native' speaker. Again, in professing a love for an other culture, Borrow reproduces himself as an English speaker of foreign tongues.

Despite articulating some mitigating elements of Borrow's style, this essay is by no means an attempt to herald Borrow's account of Wales as an exemplary discourse on cosmopolitanism or the benefits of being an affiliative outsider. Throughout the work, Borrow articulates attitudes that are offensive to all but the least sensitive of readers today. He tells the former slave he meets (who is 'brutishly ugly, his features scarcely resembling those of a human being') that, in his laziness, he is a living instance of the necessity of slavery. Further, his affinity with the Romani (literally) colours his view of Irish Travellers, and his words fit neatly into the templates of the almost inescapable racial discourse of the times when he marks their features as 'coarse and uncouth'. Still echoing racial discourse, he describes the sale of cattle at market: 'there were some Welsh cattle, small of course, and the purchasers of these seemed to be Englishmen, tall burly fellows in general, far exceeding the Welsh in height and size'.³⁰ The slippage here between the animals and their breeders is almost impossible to miss. Considering that Borrow himself was very tall and well-built, he certainly seems to stake a claim in an English genealogy. While it would be pointless to castigate Borrow for being a product of a society dominated by racial ideology, it is worth pointing out that for all his professed affinity with marginalised peoples, he continues to reproduce hegemonic discourse on questions of race. Borrow also delights in arguing with all those who are not of the Anglican faith, constantly proselytising its status as the true faith, and with political effects. With promises of money, he apparently forces a Catholic Irishman that he meets to play a Protestant loyalist song, 'Croppies Lie Down' (which Borrow had learnt while his father was stationed at Clonmel) – despite the latter's attempts to reframe the lyrics as 'Croppies Get Up'. The Irishman might be viewed as the political winner of this game, for he plays the tune and gets his shillings while Borrow sings the 'blackguard Orange words'. It is not the first time the fiddler has done so, either, having nominally given up his Catholicism to play at an Orange lodge in his youth, then reverted back when Orangeism seemed on the wane. His Catholic paymasters were less generous, however, and the man is left with ambivalent views towards religion and politics.³¹ For all his enthusiasm for Wales and for cultural heterogeneity more generally, it is very difficult to see Borrow permanently stepping away from the powerful position of white, English, protestant male.

At the chair of the bard Huw Morris, Borrow takes off his hat and stands in the rain, loudly proclaims his respects in Welsh, sits in the chair and recites the bard's verses. Looking on are an old lady, a 'buxom damsel' and his guide, John Jones. They stand

²⁹ Borrow, *Romany Rye*, 38; *Wild Wales*, 73.

³⁰ *Wild Wales*, 31; 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

watching in silence, with what Borrow takes to be approval, for 'enthusiasm is never scoffed at by the noble simple-minded, genuine Welsh, whatever treatment it may receive from the coarse-hearted, sensual, selfish Saxon'.³² This vignette is the perfect example of Borrow's attempted affiliation with a people other than his own; he deliberately plays up his eccentricity to do so: I am not like the other English, and will show you just how different I am with bold gestures. As he does so, he shows just how different he is from the Welsh, too. His observers do not chime in with his recitation (though one imagines Borrow did not afford them the opportunity). They watch, from a critical distance, his Borrowing of Welshness. He declares that he is 'ashamed to say that [he is] an Englishman', yet no Welshman or woman demands that he admit this in order to enjoy their society; this is another grand gesture that still fails to make him, even for the duration of his visit, Welsh.³³ An affiliation with a people Borrow clearly perceives to be a British other, like (but also very different from) the Romani, is what his text strives for. However, the kind of relationship he consistently describes, one where he is considered a marvel, generously welcomed, sought out as a curiosity or tolerated because he has worked hard to win someone over, is one which reproduces the identity he had when he first crossed the border: he does not destabilise any categories separating Welshness and Englishness and does not relinquish his privileged status as gentleman traveller. Who does Borrow think he is, as a result of his Welsh excursion? I suggest that he writes himself as a deliberately eccentric Englishman, using encounters with Welsh working people to both further and demonstrate his learning. He exemplifies his outsider status by cherishing seemingly imperilled languages, but echoes the speakers of those languages, reproducing his Englishness by frequently disavowing it. He can only cite shame in his Saxon identity when he inhabits it. In describing an affiliation with the Welsh, Borrow can only demonstrate that this is the one thing he is not.

³² *Ibid.*, 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, 165.