ROMANTICISM, REALISM AND REFORMISM: HAMLIN GARLAND'S THREE VIEWS OF THE INDIAN

by

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When Albert Keiser dedicated The Indian in American Literature to Hamlin Garland, he did so with a keen sense of Garland's contribution towards securing a place for the Indian in our national literature. Garland's contribution is not only significant because of the volume of his Indian work, which is in itself impressive, but also because of the zeal with which he championed the red man's cause. Between 1895 and 1903, Garland examined the American Indian so extensively in his fiction and essays that he was considered an authority on Indian matters, particularly the Plains Indian. This authority had such widespread acceptance that following the publication of Captain of the Gray Horse Troop in 1902, Garland was summoned to Washington by President Roosevelt to discuss the Indian problem. Nevertheless, with the exception of Captain, Garland's Indian writing has gone largely unnoticed, and until recently many of his Indian sketches remained unpublished.[1]

This failure to account for his Indian literature, however, has sometimes led to a misunderstanding of Garland's literary career. In Harvests of Change, for example, Jay Martin states that Garland began his career as a romanticist with the writing of Boy Life on the Prairie in 1885, but that a trip home in 1887 resulted in "romantic disillusionment," and precipitated such realistic works as "Under the Lion's Paw" (1889) and Main Traveled Roads (1891). However, having not given Garland's Indian literature thorough consideration, Martin mistakenly goes on to suggest that only a small portion of Garland's career was actually devoted to realism, and that this made him "briefly appear to be a militant reformer."

> Garland, as it happened, was a realist for only three years. First and last, he was a maker and follower of myth and romance. . . .
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> Both before and after this "realistic" interlude Garland wrote from an essentially romantic viewpoint, although his style remained uniformly realistic in fidelity to fact and detail.[2]

This assertion is misleading, for it implies that Garland ceased to write reformist-realism altogether after this three year "interlude." Such an assertion fails to account for Garland's Indian literature written between the mid-1890s and the first years of the new century. This oversight is significant, for it was here with his Indian stories that Garland again took up the banner of reform and re-enacted the pattern of his literary career a decade earlier, a pattern which would again take him from romanticism to reform-realism. This pattern began with the romantic observations found in such early accounts as "A Day at Isleta" and became increasingly realistic until reaching the delicate balance of the Silent Eaters, after which it emerged as political reform in "The Red Man's Present Needs" and as literary reform in "Red Man as Material."

Garland's first personal contact with the Indians came in 1895 when he and two artists traveled west to "see the red people" and to "collect 'Wild West' material." Although his success at the time was largely attributable to reformist works, he had decided to abandon such literature. In a letter to his publisher in 1893, Garland wrote: "I am ready to send out purely literary books. . . . I shall not repeat either my economic writing or this literary and art reform [Crumbling Idols--published the following year]. Having had my say I shall proceed on other things."[3] Thus, when Garland began to seek the Indian as material, his interest was "purely literary" rather than reformist.

To understand Garland's early accounts of the Indian, one must understand his frame of mind at the time he was recording his observations. He had apparently gone west in a highly romantic mood. In his autobiographical work, A Daughter of the Middle Border (1921), Garland recalls that mood while looking through the journal entries he had made at the time.

> The little morocco-covered notebook in which I set down some of my impressions is before me as I write. It still vibrates with the ecstasy of that enthusiasm. Sentences like these are frequent. "From the dry hot plains, across the blazing purple of the mesa's edge, I look away to where the white clouds soar in majesty above the serrate crest of Uncomphagre. Oh, the splendor and majesty of those cloud hid regions! . . . [Garland's ellipses throughout] A coyote, brown and dry and hot as any tuft of desert grass drifts by . . . Into the coolness and sweetness and cloud-glory of this marvelous land . . . . Georgeous shadows are in motion on White House Peak . . . . Along the trail as though walking a taut wire, a caravan of burros streams, driven by a wide-hatted graceful horseman . . . . Twelve thousand feet! I am brother to the eagles now! The matchless streams, the vivid orange-colored meadows. The deep surf-like roar of the firs, the wailing sigh of the wind in the grass--a passionate longing wind!" Such are my jottings.[4]

Garland's choice of adjectives throughout the above passage suggests that his enthusiam blinded him to anything but the beauty of the West. He seems to have carried this romantic vision with him to Isleta, and it is safe to assume that some of this romantic pre-conception found its way into his account of Indian life there.

It is not surprising, then, that Garland's portrayal of Indian life in "A Day at Isleta" is highly romantic. His observations begin when he and his artist friends are led through the pueblo by a young Indian boy. "Low walls of gray mud shut out the world we knew--the world of the gringo. With incredible swiftness we retreated into the past. It was as if the boy were some mighty conjurer."[5] From the very beginning, Garland seems overwhelmed by this opportunity to experience the past. When he learns that the natives will be thrashing grain and that he will be allowed to witness the event, he writes as if he were on the edge of a transcendental experience. "This was glorious! We were to see the trampling of wheat, a process as old as the hooked knife--as old as pharaoh. I felt at the moment an elation, the exultation of the dreamer permitted to explore the past and stand beside the beginnings of agriculture."[6]

Garland describes in careful detail the way in which the community participated in the thrashing. The grain was forked beneath the feet of ponies which were led around a narrow enclosure. After sufficient trampling, the grain was raked up and tossed into the air where the wind separated it from the chaff. For Garland, "it was like something seen in dream."

> I never expect to see a more peaceful, pleasantly suggestive farm scene. It was as though the golden past, the imagined peace of the dawn of our own race had been revealed to me. . . . The whole effect was that of a happy contented and peaceful people.[7]

Only through the explanation of "romantic pre-conception" can one account for Garland's reverence for this agricultural episode. Certainly his attitude stands in sharp contrast to that of the farm labor presented in Main Traveled Roads or "Under the Lion's Paw," where it is back breaking drudgery. It is indeed curious that a veteran realist such as Garland could have been lured by such basic pastoral assumptions. Again, this reverence can only be understood in terms of his romantic disposition at the time.

Garland only turns aside from his romantic description of Indian life in "A Day at Isleta" long enough to challenge the right of civilization to disturb this golden past. "I could not see that we had anything to give them. Why disturb them with our problems?"[8] This challenge is developed in the final pages of his account, but despite his arguments he seems to recognize the approaching change. "The Pueblo is undoubtedly beginning to feel the terrible solvent power of the white man. . . . In the mighty solvent of his passion all the old things give way."[9]

Although Garland never seems to doubt the validity of his highly romantic observations, his concluding paragraph suggests something about the real nature of this early experience with the Indians. "I left Isleta in the deep of night and it seems now like a dream--a fantasy born of my reading, not of my actual living."[10] Indeed, his observations are filled with pastoral assumptions that were undoubtedly part of his literary heritage.

When he wrote about this summer in A Daughter of the Middle Border, Garland seemed aware of its impact on his writing and aware of its impact on his writing and aware of how different that writing was from his earlier prairie tales.

> In truth every page of my work thereafter was colored by the experience of this summer.
>
> The reasons are easy to define. All my emotional relationships with the "High Country" were pleasant, my sense of responsibility was less keen, hence the notes of resentment, of opposition to unjust social conditions which had made my other books an offense to my readers were entirely absent in my studies of the mountaineers.[11]

For the moment, his sense of responsibility for the Indian too was perhaps diluted by what Twain called the "mellow moonshine of romance." But such an attitude was not to last long.

Garland spent the next two years working on a biography of Ulysses Grant, but he continued to feel the magnetic attraction of the West and its Indians. Again in Daughter, he writes:

> The heroic types, both white and red, which the trail fashions to its needs continued to allure me, and when in June, '97, my brother, on his vacation, met me again at West Salem, I outlined a tour which should begin with a study of the Sioux at Standing Rock and end with Seattle and the Pacific Ocean.[12]

This trip, like his return home a decade earlier, was to again result in romantic disillusionment and set him on the road to realism and reform.

The first stop of his 1897 tour was at Fort Yates, North Dakota, where Garland examined the Agency records for material about Sitting Bull. He left Fort Yates abruptly for Fort Custer, Montana, where a conflict was reportedly developing between Whites and Indians. On his second night there, he observed a Crow dance in honor of a visiting Cheyenne, Chief Two Moon. His observations about this dance suggest a growing awareness that the red man's present condition was only a shadow of the former glory that had been his true golden age. "To me this was a thrilling glimpse into prehistoric America, for these young men . . . were wholly admirable, painted lithe-limbed warriors, rejoicing once again in the light of their ancestoral moons."[13]

The following morning, Garland left Fort Custer for Lame Deer, the scene of the confrontation. In route, he crossed the Custer battlefield, which had already become a legendary place, the scene of a massacre by the savage red man. He spent that night in the home of some ranchers, where the reality of the Indian's predicament was made shockingly clear to him.

> We stopped that night at a ranch about half way across the range, and in its cabin I listened while the cattlemen expressed their hatred of the Cheyenne. The violence of their antagonism, their shameless greed for the red man's land revealed to me once and for all the fomenting spirit of each of the Indian wars which had accompanied the exterminating, century-long march of our invading race. In a single sentence these men expressed the ruthless creed of the land-seeker. "We intend to wipe these red sons-of-dogs from the face of the earth." Here was displayed shamlessly the seamy side of western settlement.[14]

Here too is displayed Garland's growing awareness that the farmers and ranchers, about whom he had written so sympathetically in his earlier work, were in reality greedy and ruthless men. This experience was to allign his sympathy forever with the Indian.

At Lame Deer, Garland gathered and recorded his observations of the conflict and interviewed Chief Two Moon, whom he had met at Fort Yates. Two Moon had been at the Custer fight, and was able to provide Garland with considerable information about Sitting Bull. Garland published the interview the following year as "General Custer's Last Fight as Seen by Two Moon." More importantly, he had gathered the raw material from which he would construct his epic tale of Sitting Bull, Silent Eaters.

By the end of the 1897 trip, Garland's romantic picture of the Indian was permanently shattered. When he returned home, the bitter reality of the Indian's plight continued to haunt him.

> How far away they seem--how helpless and how

> miserable. They look out at the whiteman with eyes that dream tragic dreams. The old suffer most. The boys and girls born in the prison land are ignorant of the wild free life of the olden time. They are rapidly becoming commonplace. They will end by becoming supine and stupid toilers.[15]

Garland's Indian education was completed as a result of his 1897 expedition. His writing from this point on would become increasingly realistic and reformist in its criticism of the white invaders.

Garland came to write Silent Eaters as a result of his interview with Chief Two Moon and his investigation of the government records at the Standing Rock Reservation. This interview and investigation had convinced him that the existing accounts of the Battle of Little Big Horn were grossly misleading, that the truth had been obscured by virtue of the one-sidedness of the reporting. Silent Eaters, however, was destined to be more than just a new perspective on the Little Big Horn battle; it was to become a symbolic treatment of the abuses suffered by all red men at the hands of whites, and Sitting Bull was to symbolize the former dignity that had once graced this proud race.

Garland decided early that the story had to be told by an Indian. To that end, he created a narrator, Iapi, who had been at the Little Big Horn as a youth, and whose father had been a member of Sitting Bull's council of wise men--the Silent Eaters. This point of view permitted the narrator to give a first-hand account of the battle, and also gave him access to Sitting Bull's thoughts during the final desperate days of his people.

The challenge for Garland was one of porportion of striking an appropriate balance between the romantic and the realistic. The theme itself is highly romantic--the passing from the earth of a noble race. The opening of the story is also highly romantic; it begins with the arrival of the first white men in Sioux territory. At this point in the Golden Age of the narrator's past, he states that "Not one of all our tribe had care as a bedfellow at this time. Even the aged smiled like children. . . . You would look long to find a people as happy as we were, because we lived as the Great Spirit had taught us to do with no thought of change."[16] If this gilded account of the idealized, heroic past were protracted, the story would quickly become a sentimental journey, but Garland wisely switches the focus to the larger theme of advancing civilization's conflict with the rear-guard of a retreating barbaric race.

After some exposure to the whites, Sitting Bull reflects upon this advancing race:

> He lived by planting; the red man by hunting. The pale-faces said: "The Red man has too much land. We will take part of it for ourselves. In return we will teach him how to plant and make bread and clothing." But they did not stop there. They said if the red man does not wish to be a planter and wear our clothing we will send out soldiers with guns and make him do our will.[17]

With this passage, Garland has pointed to the real nature of all Indian/White conflict--greed, cultural myopia, and military superiority--all on behalf of the whites. If the story continued with this black and white characterization, it would hardly be realistic; however, Garland has carefully woven realism into the literary fabric in his pursuit of the truth.

To begin with, the story is founded in realism. That is, Garland is writing from personal observation, interviews, and careful research. The execution is strengthened by virtue of the first person narration, and it is through this narrator that the more realistic observations about Indian life find their way into the story. For example, when Iapi retells the Little Big Horn episode, he simultaneously disposes of the notion that it was a massacre, and that Indians were great warriors.

> You have heard that we outnumbered Custer ten to one. This too is false. We had less than twelve hundred warriors, counting old and young. We had old-fashioned guns--many of our men had only clubs or arrows or lances. Many were boys like myself, with not even a club. We were taken unawares, not they. They had the new magazine rifles and six-shot revolvers. They were all experienced warriors, while we were not; indeed most of our men had never been in battle before and they had no notion of discipline. Each man fought alone, without direction. We were a disorderly mass of excited men. Everybody gave orders; no one was leader. That is the way of my people. We have no commander-in-chief. We fight in bands. Chief Gall led one charge, the daughter of Old Horse led another, American Horse led a third, and so it proceeded as a mob goes to war.[18]

The narrator is given additional credibility by virtue of his education at the hands of whites, and it is through this education that the black and white characterization begins to dissolve, and a "good" white man enters the story.

Lieutenant Davies, an agnostic soldier whose mind is large and whose heart is gracious, attempts to help Iapi.

> "Submit to all that the White Father demands," he advised, "for so it is ordered in the world. It is not a question of right, or the will of the Great Spirit," he went on; "it is merely a question of cannon and food. . . . Knowledge is power," he said to me. "Study, aquire wisdom, the white man's wisdom, then you will be able to defend the rights of your people," and his words sank deep into my heart.[19]

Nor does the narrator's credibility as an Indian suffer from his white education, for Sitting Bull himself encourages it. Iapi speaks of the chief's reaction: " [He]was pleased to know I was getting skilled in the white man's magic. 'I need an interpreter, one I can trust,' he said to me. 'Go in the road you have taken.'"[20]

Through the attitudes of Sitting Bull and Lt. Davies towards Iapi's education, Garland develops a theme and a possible resolution. Lt. Davies' observation that it is a matter of "cannon and food" suggests that the Indian/White conflict is really a case of cultural determinism. Although Garland never uses the term in his book, it seems that he is talking about the concept of Manifest Destiny. The chief's metaphor seems to point to the only viable solution for the Indian; he must take the white man's road. It is this metaphor--the Indian on the white man's road--that Garland develops throughout the story, and it is with the obstacles which lie along that road that Garland urges reform.

These reform urges operate in several ways, not the least of which is the characterization of Lt. Davies as a "type" of white man to be emulated.

> He was a philosopher. He had no hate of any race. He looked upon each people as the product of its conditions, and often said, "The plains Indian was a perfect adaptation of organism to environment till the whites disturbed him."[21]

Lt. Davies places the burden of responsibility clearly on the white man for disturbing this balance. Although it is evident that the Indian must take the white man's road, he cannot be expected to change from nomadic huntsman to sedentary farmer overnight. The white man must be patient and sincere in his efforts to educate the Indian to the new order.

Nor should that education attempt to remake the Indian as a white man. Instead, it should provide him with the knowledge and skills necessary for adapting to the new culture that has engulfed him. Again it is Lt. Davies who epitomizes the correct attitude for dealing with the Indian.

> "I counsel you to be a Sioux, my boy. . . . You can never be a Caucasian. . . . A race is the product of conditions, the result of a million years of struggle. I do not expect a red man to become a white man. Those who do, know nothing of the human organism. On the surface I can make some change; but deep down your emotions, your superstitions are red and always must be; that is not a thing to be ashamed of."[22]

In sharp contrast to these reform urges, Garland presents the realistic conditions of life on the reservation. Here the Indians are forbidden to hunt or possess weapons, and forbidden to travel without permission. As a result of these prohibitions, they are forced to farm for subsistence and wear the cast-off clothing given them by the agency. Moreover, they are constantly badgered to make further land concessions to the voracious whites.

Sitting Bull, as a symbol of the dignity of the old way, steadfastly refuses to make any further concessions. Consequently, he and the Indian agent are in constant struggle for control of the reservation. Again Garland portrays the struggle as something larger than the two men. The ghost dance, a messianic movement which swept through the defeated and desperate plains Indians, becomes the issue around which the two forces polarize. This dance was an attempt by the red man to purify his race by rejecting all things white, or, to use Garland's metaphor, by rejecting the white man's road. The Indian agent becomes the embodiment of those forces which wish to strip the Indian of his culture and force him to conform to the white man's ways. It is over this issue that Sitting Bull is killed by those of his own race who, through the corrupting influence and bribery of the agency, have become the traffic police for the white man's road.

Through his epic account of Sitting Bull's life, Garland was able to reveal a great deal about the nature of all Indian/White conflict. His success is largely attributable to the skillful blending of romantic theme with realistic execution and reformist intentions. Although the story was written around 1901, it remained unpublished and under revision until its appearance in The Book of the American Indian in 1923. Meanwhile, Garland became increasingly outspoken in his reform urges for the Indian, and in his renewed assault he was to abandon historical fiction for the polemic essay.

The final phase of Garland's Indian literature is perhaps best represented by the political reform of "The Red Man's Present Needs" (1902) and the literary reform of "Red Man as Material" (1903). By this point in his career, Garland had written an extensive amount of Indian fiction and was considered somewhat of an authority on the red man. In his introductory note to "The Red Man's Present Needs," it is apparent that he wished to push that authority beyond the realm of fiction in order to produce some immediate reform.

> In my wanderings over the Rocky Mountain States, I have happened upon some twelve or fifteen Indian reservations. This unofficial inspection, made for fictional purposes, I now wish to turn to practical account in aid of a clearer understanding of the present condition of the nation's wards. . . . A part of what follows is necessarily critical, but its main intent is constructive.[23]

When Garland launches his essay, it is immediately apparent that he intends to be critical, bitterly so. The calmness and control of his introduction are quickly displaced by the stinging accusations of his second paragraph. His comments on Indian reservations reveal his anger and contempt.

> These are the "corrals" or open-air prisons, into which the original owners of the continent have been impounded by the white race. . . . Speaking generally, we may say these lands are relatively the most worthless to be found in the Territory or State whose boundaries enclose the red man's home, and were set aside for his use because he would cumber the earth less there than elsewhere. Furthermore, scarcely a single one of these minute spots is safe to the red people. Every acre of land being scrutinized, and plans for securing even these miserable plots are being matured. [24]

"The Red Man's Present Needs" is more than a diatribe against white greed and ignorance; Garland carefully constructs specific reform urges for areas which he thinks demand immediate attention. For the most part, these reform urges require that the white man be patient, change his attitude towards the Indian, and increase his knowledge of the Indian's approach to life. Because of his earlier awareness of the "terrible solvent power of the white man," Garland insists throughout his essay that the Indian must be allowed to retain his cultural identity, that the races should be separate but equal.[25] Garland's concern for the preservation of the Indian's cultural heritage is markedly different from the attitudes of many of his contemporaries, and it is precisely this concern that separates Garland as a reformer from the other writers of his era and ultimately makes him more relevant to the modern reader.[26]

Garland did not reserve his criticism for the transient policy makers in Washington, but distributed it evenly within his own profession. With the publication of "Red Man as Material," Garland delivered a "moral indictment" to his fellow craftsmen with his call for literary reform in the treatment of the Indian. As a writer, he was keenly aware of what was expected of him from the reading public. He realized that from the very beginning the Indian was "material."

> You see, the explorer, the missionary, and the fictionist are each and every one working for a public, and their readers don't want a gentle, humane, pastoral and peaceful native; they want a being whom it is a hardihood to discover, a danger to convert, and a glory to slaughter.
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> . . . .
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> Under these conditions you must not expect to gain any very clear notion of what the red family is like--for this "fiend" has no family. . . . Occasionally he thrills a council, or in captivity makes a lofty appeal in language which only Ossian or Webster could have uttered off-hand; but these moments of comparative magnanimity only confuse the situation--they do not tell us what the redman really is when he is at home with his children.[27]

Garland is not just experiencing a "schooled" reaction. That is, his objection goes beyond the literary concern that the Indian has not been treated with "realism." As a literary man, Garland knows that public opinion is shaped as much by fiction as non-fiction, and that the centuries-old portrayal of the Indian as "savage" is largely responsible for his current plight.

> All this would be harmless enough if the reader only understood that the novelist doesn't know anything about "Injuns," and couldn't use his knowledge if he did--but the gentle reader is a part of a great public, and reading this kind of thing leads to false notions of human life. Such fiction has helped to make the English-speaking peoples the most ruthless conquerors the world has ever seen, ruthless in the sense that they displace and destroy with large-hearted, joyus

> [sic] self-sufficiency, blotting out all manners, customs, religions, and governments which happen to differ from their own.[28]

Because the Indian has written no history books, because he publishes no newspapers and has no telegraph, because he has no spokesman, in effect, other than those who use him as "material," Garland insists that it is the moral obligation of those who portray the red man in fiction to do so with honesty and sympathy. This burden is shared equally by the fiction readers for whom the writer works, for they determine the success of any piece of literature largely through their expectations.

Garland's Indian literature can thus be seen as a journey of growing awareness which led him from romanticism to reform-realism. The pattern which ultimately emerges closely parallels his literary journey a decade earlier. His Indian stories, however, exposed the popular literary view of the Indian and defined the problems manifest in writing about cultural myths. Only after repeated exposure was he able to shed the literary heritage that had accompanied his investigation of the Indian and approach his subject with realism and eventually reformism.

Notes

[1] L. E. Underhill and D. F. Littlefield have contributed greatly to Garland scholarship with their excellent publication, *Hamlin Garland's Observations on the American Indian* (Tuscon: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1976).

[2] Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 129.

[3] Hamlin Garland, in *Hamlin Garland: A Biography* by Jean Holloway (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1960), p. 98.

[4] Hamlin Garland, *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921), p. 29.

[5] Hamlin Garland, "A Day at Isleta" in *Hamlin Garland's Observations on the American Indian*, ed. L. E. Underhill and D. F. Littlefield (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1976), p. 74.

[6] Garland, "A Day at Isleta," *Observations*, p. 76.

[7] Garland, "A Day at Isleta," *Observations*, pp. 77-78.

[8] Garland, "A Day at Isleta," *Observations*, p. 78.

[9] Garland, "A Day at Isleta," *Observations*, p. 80.

[10] Garland, "A Day at Isleta," *Observations*, p. 81.

[11] Garland, *Daughter*, p. 31.

[12] Garland, *Daughter*, p. 38.

[13] Garland, *Daughter*, p. 42.

[14] Garland, *Daughter*, p. 43.

[15] Garland, quoted in *Observations*, pp. 28-29.

[16] Hamlin Garland, *The Book of the American* Indian (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923), p. 160.

[17] Garland, *American Indian*, p. 168.

[18] Garland, *American Indian*, p. 177.

[19] Garland, *American Indian*, p. 203.

[20] Garland, American Indian, p. 196.

[21] Garland, American Indian, p. 205.

[22] Garland, American Indian, p. 206.

[23] Garland, "Red Man's Present Needs," Observations, p. 166.

[24] Garland, "Red Man's Present Needs," Observations, p. 167.

[25] Garland may have been influenced by Booker T. Washington whom he mentions by name.

[26] Julius Seelye's recommendation in the introduction to Helen Hunt Jackson's Century of Dishonor provides an illustrative contrast to Garland's: "When the Indian, through wise and Christian treatment, becomes invested with all the rights and duties of citizenship, his special tribal relations will become extinct. This will not be easily nor rapidly done; but all our policy should be shaped toward the gradual loosening of the tribal bond, and the gradual absorption of the Indian families among the masses of our people."

[27] Garland, "Red Man as Material," Observations, pp. 179-180.

[28] Garland, "Red Man as Material," Observations, p. 182.