

# Sanctuaries in Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*

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In his essay "Style and Fame: *The Sketch Book*" James W. Tuttleton writes that "Irving's self-consciousness as a writer is inseparable from his interest in the past. But that interest ... is not merely antiquarian: it is obsessively concerned with Irving's own death and his immortality as an author" (45). Tuttleton also states thoughtfully that "we do not ordinarily associate him with such morbid thoughts" (45). However, it is noteworthy, as Tuttleton says, that "*The Sketch Book*'s opening account of the voyage from America to England accents fear, anxiety, and estrangement" (45). The confrontation of the unknown, the perilous, and the image of oblivion during the sea voyage to England affirms the anxiety of Irving's own mind and establishes a tone, an undercurrent, of concern and anguish about mortality which permeates a number of the stories and essays in *The Sketch Book*. Tuttleton writes insightfully that "Telling the story, retrieving and perpetuating some vestige, through narrative, of a transient existence—this is the burden of many of the tales in *The Sketch Book*" (46).

In his essay "Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch" Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky describes effectively Irving's state of mind in the development of his approach in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, *Gent.*: "In 1817– 1818, while he was in England, he suffered terrible anxiety and emotional

strain over the collapse of the family business and the attendant threat of impoverishment" (229). Moreover, the death of his mother in 1817 produced a sense of despair in Irving similar to the response to Matilda Hoffman's death in 1809. Irving speaks in a letter of desiring to isolate himself from society and wishing to have no contact with anyone (Letters 1: 743). In another letter from 1817, quoted by Perry Miller in his thoughtful afterword to an edition of The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., Irving describes his feelings of despondency and despair: "I feel like one withered up & blighted-broken heart is like a desert wherein can flourish no green thing-The romance of life is past" (375). Miller argues that the only way for Irving to liberate himself from this oppressive sense of melancholy was to "write ... consoling visions of benevolent humanity, tinged with reflections on death and the decomposition of corpses which would turn them into triumphs for that sensibility which alone could preserve him" (375). In his essay "Washington Irving: Amateur or Professional?" Henry A. Pochmann suggests that Irving was often prone to and susceptible to a variety of emotional moods. Around the time when Irving wrote The Sketch Book "he was given to feelings of indolence ... ineffectuality, melancholy, self-depreciation, insecurity, ... and despair" (22). With respect to the issue of the author's emotional condition Pochmann also declares that "If he managed to show the world the brighter side of himself, it was because he instinctively and consciously withdrew from social intercourse when he felt the dark moods coming on" (22).

This desire for refuge and seclusion from the world of everyday mortality and from its moments and periods of personal hardship and suffering coupled with a devotion to his writing, to developing, refining, and strengthening his literary capacity, is important for Irving as a self-revitalizing and self-supporting emotional reaction and strategy for intellectual and psychological self-preservation-and it also manifests itself in various essays and stories in The Sketch Book, especially in "The Mutability of Literature," "Rip Van Winkle," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "A Royal Poet," "Roscoe," and "Westminster Abbey." In "Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch" Rubin-Dorsky refers insightfully to the nature of Irving's separation from society when he says: "Grief implanted in Irving a strong recognition of the essential separateness of the world and the self; in addition, the self, conscious of its vulnerability, was forced to take refuge in its own repository of feelings" (231). The creation of the persona of Geoffrey Crayon enables Irving to reflect upon and examine his emotional experiences, as disappointing, painful, and tragic as they were or might have been, "without becoming

psychologically immobilized by them" (Rubin-Dorsky 232). In response to experiences of great personal despair Irving devoted himself to his writing; in 1809 he worked more intensively on A History of New York, and in 1817 he began the pieces which would become The Sketch Book. Of the significance of Geoffrey Crayon, Rubin-Dorsky writes thoughtfully in "Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch": "The innovation of Crayon, whose 'adventures' in and around London mirror his own, gained for Irving the great advantage of being able to examine and reflect upon these experiences while remaining detached enough to perceive their significance. Crayon, in other words, became a buffer between Irving and the world" (218). One might say that the idea, image, or theme of sanctuary is important and present not only in various stories and essays in The Sketch Book but also in the presentation and development of the authorial voice. For Irving creates for himself, in a sense, a sanctuary of authorial distance from the world through which he travels during 1815–1819, from the claim of absolute responsibility of perceptive and sensitive observation which one would expect from the sketches of artistic objects and cultural experiences, and from his public persona. The creation of a sanctuary of the authorial self of mythologically vital inclinations and proportions parallels and reaffirms the images of sanctuary in a beautiful, mythical natural environment and the images of sanctuary in lovely and majestic architectural interiors which permeate various pieces in The Sketch Book from "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Specter Bridegroom" to "The Mutability of Literature" and "Westminster Abbey."

In "Style and Fame: *The Sketch Book*" James W. Tuttleton states that *The Sketch Book* is afforded a sense of unity by the consistent presence and voice of Geoffrey Crayon, who "is that idle, drifting, spectatorial, dilettantish, curious, conservative, old-fashioned aspect of Irving's mind" (44). Tuttleton argues effectively that the other unifying dimension of *The Sketch Book* besides the narrative voice of the fictive persona is the "dominating theme: Time, time's ruins, dilapidation, dust and decay, the mutability of all things, and oblivion" (45). The flux of time and the destructive power of mortality are especially prominent themes in "The Mutability of Literature" and in "Westminster Abbey," essays which, while expressing a profound concern about the inevitability of transience, also celebrate the capacity of the potent author to achieve a sense of immortality and transcendence.

The individual who participates in, feels a sense of connectedness to, or represents an essential part of a mythical or mythological sanctuary or of a luminous or a twilight sanctuary exemplifies the spirit of the Wordsworthian self

## 4 SANCTUARIES IN WASHINGTON IRVING'S THE SKETCH BOOK

in "Tintern Abbey" who articulates his profound appreciation of the natural environment:

And I have felt A presence that disturbs me with the joy Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime Of something far more deeply interfused, Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, ... And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: A motion and a spirit, that impels All thinking things, all objects of all thought, And rolls through all things. (93–97, 99–102)

The persona of "Tintern Abbey" attributes such profound feelings to and grounds such feelings in the love and devotion which he feels for nature as "the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being (110–111)." William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798) celebrates a lovely natural sanctuary, its aura of gorgeous spaciousness, and its delightful tranquility which permeates diverse aspects of the environment. In contemplating the beauty and peacefulness of nature the sensitive individual experiences a psychic suspension of everyday mortality and becomes a living soul, which leads to an attainment of a sense of spatial and temporal expansiveness.

While Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane in their respective stories do not show the same deeply emotional and spiritual reverential appreciation for nature which the persona of "Tintern Abbey" does, what this persona says about the inspirational and powerful presence of the spirit of nature is certainly appreciated, understood, and felt by the protagonists in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Both Rip and Ichabod, in the presence of the evening, participate in an experience which possesses a magical aura. By signifying a part of a mythical sanctuary, both Rip and Ichabod experience not only a presence in nature which "disturbs" them with "the joy of elevated thoughts" but also "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused." Such an experience of the sublime is at the heart of the mythical experience of a sanctuary. The notion of half creating and perceiving which "Tintern Abbey" emphasizes in this passage is also relevant to the mythical experiences of Rip and Ichabod. For in a sense this is precisely what both protagonists do in their respective mythical experiences—they perceive aspects of the natural environment around them and they also embellish or enlarge the circumference of such perceptions through their own imaginative vitality. Only Rip, for example, would seemingly know for certain what actually transpired in the course of his mythical experience in the Catskill Mountains. Even if one assumes the veracity of his story, one might also wonder whether he has elaborated on any aspects of the tale through his own narrative ingenuity, a creative capacity which is celebrated at the end of the story.

The images and representations of sanctuary in *The Sketch Book*, and especially in such stories and essays as "Rip Van Winkle," "The Specter Bridegroom," "The Mutability of Literature," "Westminster Abbey," "Stratford on Avon," and "A Royal Poet," are characterized by the same qualities which are so important to the depiction of a sense of sanctuary in "Tintern Abbey," namely, an aura of a protected and enclosed ambience, a profound serenity, a spirit of harmony, an expansive sense of space and time which enables the participating individual to achieve an epiphanic moment of awareness about life and the human condition, an awareness of the beauty of an architectural creation and the aura of decay which mortality imposes on it, and a capacity to see "into the life of things."

In "Notes and Extracts, 1825" Washington Irving wrote: "This world is usurped by the plodder & the moneymaker and the labourer, so Scarce a quiet corner left in it for the poet" (Journals and Notebooks: Volume 3, 1819–1827, 665). Such a comment could certainly reflect the state of mind of Irving in the second decade of the nineteenth century which was a very difficult and painful one for him emotionally and psychologically. The emotional and psychological concerns and pressures which Irving was suffering through in 1816, for example, especially because of his family's financial problems, are expressed in a letter to Henry Brevoort where he speaks of feeling so harassed "by the cares & anxieties of business" that he sometimes "felt almost broken down in health and spirits." Such statements describing feelings of unhappiness, despair, or restlessness suggest the desire and the need for a sense of sanctuary, a refuge of peacefulness, serenity, beauty, and inner harmony separated from the vicissitudes of the world of everyday mortality. The spatial aura and the parameters of this place of refuge, or of various places of refuge, for which Irving is seeking are inspired and established to a considerable extent by and in the area which first stimulated his imaginative reflections. In "Notes and Extracts, 1825" Irving wrote in one entry: "I trace many of my best feelings and best thoughts to their first burst while wandering on the banks of the Hudson. It was there the world dawned upon me as a fairy land; and though checquerd and sad experience have thrown many a cloud on it, yet still I look back beyond these all to the sunny realm of boyish imagination" (Journals and Notebooks: Volume 3, 1819-1827, 660).

# 6 SANCTUARIES IN WASHINGTON IRVING'S *THE SKETCH BOOK*

In the Journals and Notebooks, Volume II, 1807–1822, there is an important statement in which Irving spoke of the potent influence which scenes of childhood have on the memory and on the imagination, while articulating the supreme significance of the Hudson River in his emotional and intellectual life:

For my own part I thank heaven that I was born among some of the loveliest scenery in the world. The remembrance of the Hudson, that noble river, which was the wonder and delight of my boyhood, remains with me as a kind of mental property. But it is not the recollection of its sunny reaches, its broad unruffled bays, its woody mountains, its long melting promontories, tinted as they are in memory ... that have with me the greatest charm. I recall the early ideas of the beautiful and sublime that were awakened by that glorious stream. There was an Epic simplicity and grandeur about it that filled my mind. (Introduction x)

This belief in a mythical sanctuary, in a sanctuary of mythical presence and mythological vitality in a lovely natural environment, especially in the evening, manifests itself particularly in such sketches as "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The Sketch Book also offers various instances of twilight or evening sanctuaries in a private space of architectural beauty or in the secluded recesses of a majestic public space or architectural creation of great public significance, for example, in "A Royal Poet," "The Mutability of Literature," and "Westminster Abbey." These magnificent interior spaces in Westminster Abbey or Windsor Castle may offer the sensitive and insightful observer not only an aura of "the shadowy grandeurs of the past," which is Crayon's explicitly stated aspiration and goal, but also a vital sense of sanctuary away from the suffering and hardship of the world of everyday mortality, whether transient or more lasting, luminous or twilight, literal or vitally imagined, decaying or vibrantly lovely. The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. also emphasizes the importance of a sense of intellectual refuge in the mind of the thoughtful and mythically vital individual. Oppressed by cares and concerns deriving from or influenced by the harshness, coarseness, or devaluation shown by society and by the world of everyday mortality, the sensitive individual is, as Crayon says in "Roscoe," compelled to cherish "the resources of his own mind" (25) and "the superior society of his own thoughts" (25). This kind of centripetally motivated sanctuary celebrates the intellectual vitality and emotional integrity of the individual isolated from the vicissitudes and inconsistencies of everyday life who is able to appreciate and to enjoy the presence of antiquity and posterity, for the "solitude of such a mind is its

state of highest enjoyment" (25). In "A Royal Poet" Crayon offers another potent example of this richly secluded landscape of the inherently dynamic and creative mind—such a mind is analogous to the majestic intellect of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In Book 14 of *The Prelude* the "majestic intellect" (14: 67) is portrayed as "a mind sustained / By recognitions of transcendent power, / In sense conducting to ideal form, / In soul of more than mortal privilege" (14: 74–77). Such creatively vital and majestic minds have the extraordinary capacity, as Wordsworth says astutely in *The Prelude*, to "hold fit converse with the spiritual world, / And with the generations of mankind / Spread over time, past, present, and to come, / Age after age, till Time shall be no more" (14: 108–111). Wordsworth proclaims that such minds "are truly from the Deity" (14: 112) for they have, as James in Irving's "A Royal Poet," the potent capability to transcend, or to seem to transcend, the limitations and the restraints of mortal space and time.

In chapter one I present a short history of the types of sanctuaries in nineteenth century American and European literature, emphasizing Irving's important contribution to this rich legacy. In chapter two I discuss "Rip Van Winkle" and its depiction of an important mythical sanctuary in a beautiful natural environment. In chapter three I analyze the representation of sanctuaries in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "The Specter Bridegroom." In chapter four I explore the description of sanctuaries in lovely, twilight architectural interiors and in other aesthetically interesting spaces in "The Mutability of Literature," "Westminster Abbey," "Stratford on Avon," "The Boar's Head Tavern, Eastcheap," "Rural Life in England," "The Art of Bookmaking," and "A Royal Poet."

One of the most interesting aspects of the presence of Geoffrey Crayon, Irving's persona in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, *Gent.*, is that he is not designated as the narrator of two of the most prominent stories in the collection, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." These two narratives are presumably the work of the antiquarian and historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, reflecting the extensive research which he did into the lives, myths, and legends of the old Dutch families in New York. Nevertheless, Geoffrey Crayon is very similar to Rip and to Ichabod, for they share comparable inclinations and motivations as well as a profound appreciation for a particular area of the state of New York and its mythical vitality. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky states in *Adrift in the Old World: The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving* that as "Geoffrey Crayon, apparently, both Rip and Ichabod desire nothing more than to live tranquil lives, primarily by inhabiting a safe, ordered, unchanging environment" (102). Yet, neither Rip nor Ichabod is vouchsafed a sense of an orderly and peaceful existence in the world of everyday mortality. Both of these individuals are interested in helping others, are physically capable of doing so, as seen in the fact that Rip plays with the children in their games and in the fact that Ichabod helps with various farm chores, are capable of communicating well and playing well with others, have a generous spirit, and show a sense of community and an interest in enhancing the aesthetic and intellectual or imaginative wellbeing of the community. But each also has the aura of a dilettante, even though they can be very congenial and exceedingly helpful to their neighbors. Whereas Rip is seemingly incapable of devoting himself to his own socioeconomic advancement, Ichabod is too ambitious, for example, conceiving of himself as a future lord of the manor, and too self-consumed in materialistic projections of the future to realistically achieve such ambitions in the present. Both characters cherish and believe in the importance of the imagination and its capacity to create a landscape of spatial and temporal expansiveness and transcendence beyond everyday mortality. As Rip and Ichabod do not seem able to create an aura of refuge in everyday life, or are prevented by circumstances or fate from doing so, they aspire to attain this in a world of imaginative reality and vitality beyond the confines of everyday mortality. In fact, the world of the imagination, and the realms of myth, legend, and extraordinary tales which it has the potential to create, nurture, and sustain, is of the greatest importance to both individuals.

Geoffrey Crayon emphasizes in the very first paragraph of The Sketch Book his intellectual curiosity about other places and characters and his interest in exploring not only his hometown but also the towns, villages, and countryside nearby where he learned about locations of historical and mythical importance. It is not arbitrary or insignificant that Crayon says here that his adventures into the neighboring areas occurred in the afternoon on holidays, as the temporal setting of some of the most vital stories and essays in The Sketch Book is the afternoon or the evening (the afternoon stretching into the evening). Crayon's interest in travels and wanderings, as that of Don Quixote in the work of Cervantes, increases over time and not only encompasses books about travels but is also connected to a desire for imaginative vitality. Although Crayon praises the great beauty of the American natural landscape, he also expresses a strong interest to see Europe and its artistic masterpieces reflecting a past splendor. Of the situation of the narrator in The Sketch Book William L. Hedges writes in Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802–1832 that it is really "Geoffrey Crayon who is telling the stories,

that is, an American who is in England and who has aspirations to an English style of gentility but who nevertheless has fond recollections of settings which he frequented as a boy and a young man" (141). In "Washington Irving: The Growth of a Romantic Writer" Joy S. Kasson describes Geoffrey Crayon thoughtfully as follows: "Characterizing himself as a desultory wanderer who longs to 'escape ... from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past,' Crayon suggests a romantic traveler such as Lord Byron's Childe Harold in the service of the picturesque rather than the sublime" (27). Kasson proceeds to make an interesting parallel between *The Sketch Book* and *Lyrical Ballads*: "Parts of *The Sketch Book* could be considered a sort of prose *Lyrical Ballads*, drawing on folklore and logical history, presenting sketches of rural village folk, tales of broken hearts, and just a hint of the supernatural" (27).

The final paragraph of "The Author's Account of Himself" in The Sketch Book is also interesting because it displays the democratic inclinations of the author while at the same time foreshadowing similar passages such as the opening paragraph of "Rip Van Winkle," which emphasizes the capacity of everyday people to signify a vital source of folklore and local history. In the spirit of the landscape painter who focuses on cottages and everyday landscapes in his travels Crayon suggests that his work in his European adventures reflects an interest in exploring various ordinary or seemingly ordinary places for their picturesque beauty. That Crayon says that he has been diverted by his "idle humor" (15) from "the great objects" (15) which one might expect from such a cultural enterprise belies his significant achievement. For in numerous pieces in The Sketch Book, for example in "Rip Van Winkle," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "The Specter Bridegroom," "The Mutability of Literature," and "Stratford on Avon," Crayon does depict special places of past and present aesthetic and cultural significance while also dealing insightfully with the vitally important themes of the imagination, of myth, and of the mythical heritage of a country. In his essay "The Sketch Book" in Washington Irving, A Tribute, Haskell S. Springer affirms the breadth of the author's vision, suggesting that one reason for Irving's success with this publication was that it represents "a literary potpourri, specifically diversified to appeal to a variety of taste" (22).

Of the publication history of *The Sketch Book* Springer writes that "During 1819 and 1820 *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, *Gent.* was published in seven installments in the United States and in two volumes in England" (21). Carl H. Woodring describes in "The English Literary Scene in the 1820s" the success of *The Sketch Book* in England as deriving at least to some extent from the fact that it "found its audience when the political acrimony of the previous decade began to fade" (41). Woodring also makes the interesting point that Irving's essays "ushered in the tolerance, the social reconciliations, of the 1820s" (41). In his Introduction in *Washington Irving*, *A Tribute* Andrew B. Myers mentions Irving's recollection in the "Preface" in 1848 to his "Author's Revised Edition" of the difficulties of having the work published in England, especially because the first publisher failed causing the interruption of the sale, and speaks of the fortunate circumstance of having the book revitalized by "teamwork from the most famous novelist of the day (Walter Scott, a recent Irving acquaintance) and the most famous publisher (John Murray II)—a conjunction of planets!" (7).

In his essay "Washington Irving and the Genesis of the Fictional Sketch" Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky says that with "the publication of The Sketch Book in 1819–1820, Washington Irving transformed the popular travel sketch into a form uniquely his own, the fictional sketch" (217). The travel sketch, a prose piece which depicted the observations of individuals enjoying the artistic and cultural achievements of the Old World, was prevalent in English and American magazines of the time. Of Irving's capacity to produce a vitally interesting variation of this sketch, Rubin-Dorsky states that "Irving realized that if he appropriated the form he could capitalize on his considerable artistic talent and his sharp appreciation for the visual element in prose" (217). Irving reinforces the spirit of participating in the tradition of aesthetically vital sketching, of producing interesting and sensitive responses to the artistic and cultural beauties and wonders of the Old World, by entitling his work The Sketch Book and by saying in "The Author's Account of Himself" that he observed many scenes of everyday life without considering them "with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print shop to another" (15). Yet, in exemplifying in his own literary sketches the qualities which he attributes to the great poets in "The Mutability of Literature," Crayon implicitly proclaims himself to be much more than merely a "humble lover of the picturesque." For in numerous stories and essays in The Sketch Book Crayon not only "gives the choicest thoughts" (136) and "illustrates them by everything that he sees most striking in nature and art" (136) but also "enriches them by pictures of human life" (136) which thoughtfully capture a significant dimension of the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual spirit of the age. What Crayon suggests about the capacity of such authors as Shakespeare to signify in their writings

"the wealth of the language—its family jewels, which are thus transmitted in a portable form to posterity" (136) may also be said of his, of Irving's, stories and essays in *The Sketch Book* as well as of various other of Irving's works such as A History of New York, Bracebridge Hall, the Tales of a Traveller, A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, The Alhambra, and the Life of George Washington—for "the brilliancy and intrinsic value of the gems continue unaltered" (136). Moreover, there is a poetic enchantment, an aura of mythical vitality, about the places in New York, and especially in the Hudson River valley and in the Catskill Mountains, which Irving writes about in *The Sketch Book* which will endure and be nurtured for as long as myth and legend are valued in the literary consciousness of the national culture and for as long as the special sites relating to the life and work of Irving are appreciated and revered.

The belief in and devotion to a sense of sanctuary with its aura of poetic enchantment, whether expressed in a twilight vision or in a moment of luminescent vitality, which are so important in Irving's *The Sketch Book* are also especially significant in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807). In stanza nine of the Immortality Ode Wordsworth's persona glorifies "those first affections" (148) which represent the sources of our creative and visionary capacity. Moreover, such affections, such "shadowy recollections" (149), have the power to transform the clamor and encroachment of mortality into epiphanically serene moments of eternal truth. By achieving a continuity of such vital and visionary moments, the creative self shapes a meaningful and worthwhile life.

In the last lines of stanza ten of the Immortality Ode the persona responds to his poignant and thoughtful awareness of mortality by asserting that he will find hope and comfort in what remains behind after the splendor of the past is gone. He will find strength in a "timeless" present of things past, things present, and things future. In fusing these qualities in the "faith that looks through death" (185), the persona implies his capacity to participate in and to shape an expansive sense of time. In stanza ten especially Wordsworth's persona attains intimations of immortality not only through the joy of nature, by participating instinctively and vitally in the eternal beauty and dynamic joyousness of nature, but also through his experience of "the primal sympathy" (181) and "the philosophic mind" (186) and through his own creative endeavor. As the persona of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode with whom he shares an appreciation of various lovely aspects of nature and of special places of serene refuge, a sense of devotion to "those first affections" (148) which signify "the fountain-light of all our day" (151), a belief in the power of the creative intellect and in the capacity of literary productivity to transform or transcend suffering, a critical awareness of mortality, and a magnanimous spirit, Irving strives in *The Sketch Book* to overcome the anguish and vicissitudes of mortality through his sensitive depiction and representation of sanctuaries in beautiful natural environments and in aesthetically interesting and majestic architectural spaces with a twilight ambience, as well as in the luminescent imagination, in the "soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death, / In years that bring the philosophic mind." (The Immortality Ode, 183–86).