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The Spy Stories of Len Deighton

ROMANTIC REALITY IN THE SPY STORIES OF LEN DEIGHTON

By Fred Erisman

The spy in fiction has many forms. To some readers, he appears in shapes as varied as Eric Ambler's affable Andreas Zaleshoff, William Haggard's urbane Col. Charles Russell, John Le Carre's bland George Smiley, or Donald Hamilton's coldly professional Matt Helm. To others, he appears as the cowboy hero in modern dress or the private eye gone underground, a modernized version of his mythic forebears.[1] To Jacques Barzun, he appears as a child—a bright, slightly bratty, nine-year-old boy. The basis for this conclusion, Barzun says, is that

> Nine is the age of seeking omniscience on a low level. The spy's ingenuity. . . , his shifting partisanship without a cause, like his double bluffs, his vagrant attachments, and his love of torturing and of being tortured are the mores of the preadolescent gang. . . . For adult readers to divert themselves with tales of childish fantasy is nothing new and not in itself reprehensible. What is new is for readers to accept the fantasy as wiser than civil government, and what is reprehensible is for the modern world to have made official the dreams and actions of little boys.[2]

A childish vision of life has become a model for society.

Barzun's metaphor of the child, pejorative as it is in intent, is valuable, for it unwittingly helps to reveal the essentially Romantic nature of the spy story. There is no question that Romantic thought, from the works of Rousseau and Wordsworth to those of Emerson and Thoreau, elevates the child as an ideal to emulate.[3] Inseparable from that idealization in Romantic thought are personal, intellectual, and emotional individualism, and action from personal principle rather than from expediency.[4] These qualities, as much as the childish ones singled out by Barzun, also describe the fictional spy, making him, in his most fully developed state, an appealingly Romantic figure whose popularity reflects the twentieth century reader's nagging fear of chaos.

The Romantic appeals of the fictional spy strikingly appear in the half-dozen suspense novels written between 1963 and 1974 by Len Deighton (1929-). The first of these, *The Ipcress File* (1963), was highly successful, ranked high in the British Crime Writers Association's competition for best crime novel of the year, and established Deighton as an author of promise. After it came a competent but lesser book, *Horse Under Water* (1963; U.S. ed. 1968), and Deighton's two best thrillers, *Funeral in Berlin* (1965) and *The Billion Dollar Brain* (1966), both of which memorably evoked the drably complex world of international espionage. Another minor novel, *An Expensive Place to Die* (1967), was followed by *Spy Story* (1974), which regained some of the luster of the earliest books. Uneven though they occasionally are, all six novels convey a sense of the aimless intricacy of an intrigue-ridden society, pervaded by obscurity and betrayal. Through this murky society, "as nameless as [the] Continental Op and just about as convincingly professional," moves Deighton's agent-narrator.[5] This character, carefully established as "a working-class boy from Burnley, opposed to all authority, who dislikes or distrusts anybody outside his own class," is Deighton's answer to the problems posed to the individual by contemporary life.[6]

Confronted at every turning by unreality, the narrator, nameless always, embarks on a quest for personal freedom while continuing to practice his craft. From the first novel to the most recent, his every effort furthers his quest. As *The Ipcress File* opens, he is transferring from Military Intelligence to a freewheeling civilian agency, W.O.O.C.(P), having previously transferred from the rigidity of the Army to Military Intelligence.[7] At the outset of *Spy Story*, he is working for the War Game Studies Centre, having resigned from W.O.O.C.(P). His moves, without exception, fail to give him the satisfaction that he seeks. Although he performs his tasks in each post successfully, even brilliantly, his professional skill cannot compensate for his individual dissatisfaction with the world in which he must live. His solution to the dilemma is simple. He sets out to establish his own brand of reality, becoming in the process the Romantic hero in a twentieth-century setting. Significantly, though, he elects not the flamboyant Byronism of the European Romantic, but rather a Thoreauvian questing after inward reality in an outwardly unreal world.

The world in which Deighton's agent operates—the so-called "real world"—is superficially no different from that encountered by any other urban resident of the twentieth century. To the ordinary citizen it is a largely featureless world, a predictable, tolerable arena for the routine activities of mundane life. If it has no clear-cut virtues, no readily apparent heroes, neither has it clear-cut vices and patent villains. For the person who, like Deighton's agent, must work covertly, however, it is a world of another sort. Uncertainty replaces certainty, complexity replaces the mindless simplicity of routine, and all that one can count upon is a fluctuating degree of frustration. It is a world amply bearing out Deighton's own view of life as "ragged and untidy."[8]

Contributing to the raggedness of the spy's existence is uncertainty, a persistent motif in the novels. Because

interests change, alliances shift, and national priorities are reordered almost daily, Deighton's agent cannot count upon bringing any problem to a satisfactory ending. "Don't ever hanker after tidiness," he tells his secretary. "Don't ever think or hope that the great mess of investigation that we work on is suddenly going to resolve itself like the last chapter of a whodunnit: I've-got-all-gathered-together-in-the-room-where-the-murder-was-done kind of scene. . . . Just knit quietly away and be thankful for the odd sock or even a lopsided cardigan with one sleeve."[9] The same bleak attitude is reflected by his superior at W.O.O.C.(P), who remarks that a bungled operation "happened beautifully" and points out to him that "success is just a state of mind. We don't get called in until there has already been a failure somewhere."[10] Since the nature of life precludes clear-cut successes, the agent must content himself with the mere appearance of success, lopsided though it may be.

Uncertainty of a second sort appears in the topsy-turvy reversal of conventional values that permeates the stories. In the spy's world, as Deighton presents it, the ordinary person's commonplaces require careful scrutiny. The spy, for example, expects lies rather than the truth. "There's a law held inviolate by the people among whom I work," remarks the narrator: *"Truth varies in inverse proportion to the influence of the person concerned."* Col. Alexeyevitch Stok of the KGB, a recurring character in the stories, echoes this cynical view when he acknowledges that "I make my plans upon the basis of everyone being untrustworthy."[11] In addition, the spy weighs traditional ethical concepts against the needs of the moment. When asked to swear on his honor as to a certain point, the narrator blithely gives his word, musing as he does so, "What a strange medieval mind you have. . . . On your honor is calculated to make me break down and confess."[12] Finally, the spy accepts that even long-standing patterns of national identity are at best confused and at worst perverted. In Deighton's novels, Israelis pose as Americans, Englishmen pose as Irish, and the narrator recalls seeing a Kiplingesque film in Calcutta during which the audience, Indian to a man, cheered on the British soldiers as they routed the fuzzy-wuzzies.[13]

Of all of the conventionalities distorted by the spy's world, the one most corrupted is the notion of friendship. Trust becomes for the spy necessary distrust. It comes as no surprise when the narrator remarks that "it's not wise to make too many close friends in this business," or warns a co-worker that "the moment that you think that you know who your friends are is the moment to get another job."[14] After all, one expects a spy to be wary of entangling personal alliances. More surprising—and telling—is his observation that certain kinds of friends are necessary: "'A spy has no friends,' people say; but it's more complex than that. A spy has to have many friends, in fact many sets of friends. Friends he's made by doing things and by not doing other things. Every agent has his own 'old boy network,' and like every other 'old boy network,' it cuts across frontiers, jobs and every other loyalty—it's a sort of spy's insurance policy."[15] Friendship, the quality that for the ordinary person makes life tolerable, becomes for the spy merely another means to an end, a professional ploy to protect his skin.

A third uncertainty present in the spy's world is that created by the ubiquity of deception. Appearances cannot be trusted. Names are meaningless. The narrator's studied anonymity throughout the books is no accident, for in the spy's world, a name is a convenience and not a designator. It is a cloak that can be donned or doffed in an instant, carrying with it no more than the identity of the moment.[16] In an existence in which a bank is not a bank, but a clearinghouse for intelligence reports (as in *Funeral in Berlin*); a taxi is not a taxi, but a high-powered road car (as in *Horse Under Water*); and a French café is not a restaurant, but a morgue (as in *Spy Story*), the agent has no assurance that what he is facing is what it purports to be.

A striking consequence of the spread of deception is that appearances often take on more reality than the reality that they represent. When personal identities are no more substantial than wraiths, concrete evidence of identity becomes important beyond all reason. Such is the case with identity papers, the inevitable impedimenta of travel in a complex world. When introduced to Col. Stok, the narrator asks for identification. Stok's identity card shows him to be Captain Maylev; when queried, he replies, "And your passport says that you are Edmond Dorf. . . , but we are both victims of circumstance." He and the narrator know that he is Stok, but to the world he is Maylev. Elsewhere, Sonny Sontag, a professional forger, succumbs entirely to the

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lure of the papers that he produces every day. "The first time I ever met Sonny he forged a Ministry of Works pass for me in the name of Peter Jolly," the agent reports. "Since that day, with a faith in his own handiwork that typified him, he always called me Mr. Jolly."[17] And, in *Funeral in Berlin*, the self-fulfilling nature of identity papers forms the core of the plot, as three separate groups strive to lay hands on the papers that will permit the bearer to tap the wealth immured in a Swiss bank. For the denizens of the spy's world, reality is determined by documents, not by innate characteristics.

The world of Deighton's spy is a fragmented, evanescent one, in which nothing is permanent and little is trustworthy. It is a world of the present rather than one of history, in which the individual lives for the moment, ignoring most of what has gone before and forsaking any hope of knowing what will come. It is a world of chaos, in which "you no longer know where you are, who you are, and who anybody else is."[18] And it is a world of shifting illusion much like that described in 1844 by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus."[19]

Faced with such a disjointed and elusive world, the Romantic individual comes to grips with reality "only or mainly by a transcendental act of will."[20] One version of this act can be found in Emerson's reply to the problem that he himself poses; if the world is but an assortment of discrete beads, "temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung."[21] That is, if the outer world creates complexity and confusion, the individual must impose upon it a unity derived from his inner self. This is the solution that he advocates in "Self-Reliance," remarking that "My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. . . . What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think."[22] A similar version of the transcendent act is embraced by Deighton's spy hero, as he creates for himself a world of personal, private reality. If his outward identity changes according to the needs of the assignment, his inward self is his own; if his public tastes are those of the moment, his private tastes are those of personal preference.

The private life of Deighton's protagonist is all that an Emersonian hero could wish. A self-created world, it supplies the certainty and personal control denied the spy in his professional life. A fellow spy, permitted a fleeting glimpse into this private life, remarks enviously: "The first time I ever saw him was in Frankfurt. He was sitting in a new white Jensen sports car that was covered in mud with a sensational blonde, sensational. He was wearing very old clothes, smoking a Gaulois cigarette and listening to a Beethoven quartet on the car radio and I thought, Oh boy, just how many ways can you be a snob simultaneously?"[23] But what for one man is snobbery is for another the essence of existence—a reduction of life to its self-determined essentials in the best Thoreauvian manner. By making his intellectual life, his emotional life, and his professional life uniquely his own, Deighton's hero achieves his escape from the chaos about him.

Although outwardly antagonistic toward anything

Michael Caine as Harry Palmer in THE IPCRESS FILE.
[Universal Studios, 1965]

smacking of intellectual pretension (a part of his more genuine distrust of the upper-class establishment), Deighton's spy is a competent and dedicated military historian. He acknowledges that this pursuit is not for all. Of a leave he notes that "I had spent it doing little or nothing unless you are prepared to consider sorting through my collection of military history books a job fit for a fully grown male. Not many of my friends were so prepared."[24] With characteristic independence, however, he devotes his leisure to the study of history. During the events recorded in *Funeral in Berlin* he recognizes at a glance a sand-table reconstruction of the climax of the Battle of Waterloo; in the course of *The Billion Dollar Brain* he fills in an empty evening with a crackling fire and Fuller's *Decisive Battles of the Western World*, and later travels to New York with Wedgwood's *The Thirty Years' War* as hotel reading; and, when he finally resigns from W.O.O.C.(P), he gravitates to a post at the Strategic War Game Studies Centre, doing computer reenactments of famous battles. His mind is his own.

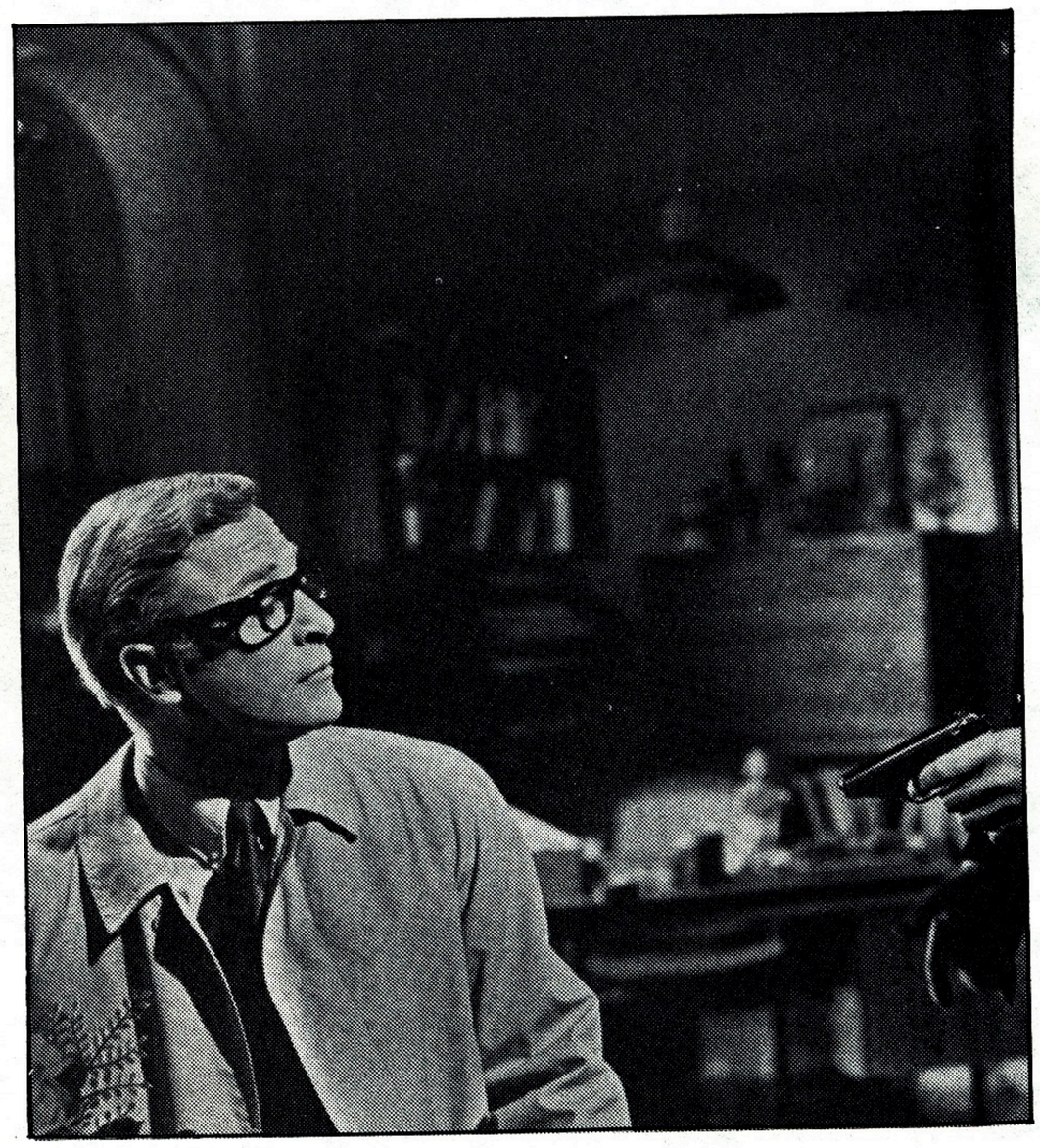
The independence reflected in his intellectual life extends to his emotional life, as well. He is very much a sensualist, but not a fashionably trendy one. Instead, he concentrates upon gratifying those eclectic tastes that most please him. His preferred coffee is Blue Mountain brand, strong and dark, though he can discourse knowledgeably about a variety of blends and roasts. He smokes harsh Gaulois cigarettes by preference, even when milder brands are available. He goes to some lengths to single out the foods and restaurants that he likes, eating ham on rye sandwiches with mango chutney from Wally's Delicatessen across the street from the run-down building that houses his office (as in *The Ipcress File*), red caviar and sour, dark bread in Leningrad (as in *The Billion Dollar Brain*) or Dover Sole with a dry Pouilly-Fuissé at Chez Solange (as in *Funeral in Berlin*). The same idiosyncratic eclecticism appears in his tastes in music. He responds with equal intensity to Duke Ellington and Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* in *The Ipcress File*; to Dinah Washington's treatment of "I'm Through With Love," Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England*, and Schönberg's *Variations for Wind Instruments* in *Funeral in Berlin*; and to Ingrid Haebler's recordings of the Mozart piano concertos in *Spy Story*. Indeed, so profound is the satisfaction he gains from food and music that it breaks out into explicit statement: deep in a subtly seasoned vichysoisse and a rare steak during a spell of confusion in *The Ipcress File*, he muses, "This was reality, this was the world—not the scene through the window; that was a fable."[25]

The diversity of his tastes in history and food notwithstanding, it is in his professional life that the spy's Romantic self-determination is most elaborately developed. As a professional, he recognizes the need for an individual commitment to the task at hand, a commitment to be pursued in as dedicated a fashion as the pursuit of good food and good music. The task must be carried out, no matter what obstacles are thrown into the agent's path. It is, however, to be carried out dispassionately: "There is no room for heroics, vendettas and associated melodrama in an efficient shop. You stand up, get shot at, then carry on quietly."[26] The narrator's approach to the task is unsullied by patriotic, political, or personal motives; given a job to do, he does it because it is to be done.

Because he is a Romantic as well as a professional, he is gifted with a vision that enables him to see that job in its greater context. He has, he acknowledges, "spent my whole adult life being nearby, watching half the human race committing suicide, and from where I'm sitting the other half seem hell-bent on following suit." But even as he recognizes the suicidal tendencies of the mass of humanity, Deighton's spy also recognizes that he, his co-workers, and even his antagonists are the only ones who can take effective action. Col. Stok makes the point clear to him: "We soldiers must not talk politics. Our job is to take the stupid and impossible fantasies of our politicians and try to make them work in terms of flesh and blood."[27] The professional agent, whether British or Russian, is the one who makes reality out of his leaders' unreality.

The narrator, like Dawlish, his superior, and like Stok, his foil, is able to generate this reality through the exercise of his own gifted vision and his own self-knowledge. Assigned to a task, he follows his own instinctive sense of the fitness of things, trusting only himself in his efforts to carry the mission through. As he does so, he strives to maintain the stability of the political world, if only to avoid the horrors that would result should it be overturned. Given the near-impossible task of keeping the world on an even keel, he calls upon the only resource that he has, his knowledge of himself, his

Action from FUNERAL IN BERLIN. *[Paramount, 1966]*



world, and his craft. "Professionals," Col. Stok says at one point, "never make problems."[28] Deighton's agent agrees. True professionals—and Romantic heroes like himself—never make problems, because they know what they are, what they must do, and what they are capable of doing. In his work, as in his personal life, he carries Romantic self-knowledge to its fullest extent.

As he moves through the six novels that chronicle his career, Len Deighton's nameless spy many times changes his outward identity, his place of residence, and his occupation, but never his striving for reality. Required by his profession to pose, to lie, and to kill, he comes at last to see "that the dominant color in the Cold War is neither black nor white, but grey, that the issues in the East-West conflict are as blurred as a defective television tube, and that perhaps personal rather than national honor may be the only modern standard by which a man can judge himself and others."[29] Accepting the colorlessness of the Cold War world, but solitary and proud like the archetypal detective described by Marshall McLuhan, he erects for himself a precisely limited and controlled life that contrasts dramatically with the raggedness of the world about him.[30]

In taking this action, Deighton's spy establishes for himself a life of Romantic reality. His action is transcendent, personal, and principled, an action entirely in line with the philosophy of life espoused by many Romantic theorists, but most memorably articulated by Henry David Thoreau. Early in *Walden* (1854), Thoreau remarks that the mass of mankind is misguided: "I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be." To clear up this confusion of appearances and reality, he proposes that each person find reality for himself. "Let us settle ourselves," he writes, "and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe. . . , till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin."[31] Once awakened to the spuriousness of purported reality, the Thoreauvian individual can establish his own reality, regardless of the chaos flowing about him.

Deighton's narrator heeds Thoreau's words. Wedging his way through the mud and slush of deceit that necessarily surrounds a spy, he comes at last to the rock-like reality of military history, food, drink, music, and professional pride. Denied by his circumstances the solitude of a Walden Pond and the comparative tranquility of the nineteenth century, he nonetheless finds in the murky turbulence of the twentieth century a quiet backwater that he can make his own. In his flat, with his books, his records, and his kitchen, he seals out the rest of the world. He establishes an unchanging, unshakable reality within himself, for himself. Surrounded finally by true reality, he lives so that when he comes to die, an end that in the world of espionage is more likely to come sooner than later, he cannot say that he has not lived.

NOTES

1. Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1969), p. ix.

2. Jacques Barzun, "Meditations on the Literature of Spying," *American Scholar*, 34 (1965), 173.

3. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (N. Y.: W. W. Norton, 1971), pp. 379-384, 411-412.

4. Howard Mumford Jones, *Revolution & Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Chaps. 8, 12, passim.

5. Anthony Boucher, "Criminals at Large," *New York Times Book Review*, 17 January 1965, p. 48. Deighton turns away from this character in his more recent thriller, *Yesterday's Spy* (1975), replacing him with two well-worn agents from World War II days.

6. Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 235.

7. Len Deighton, *The Ipcress File* (N. Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1963), pp. 16-17.

8. Hugh Moffett, "Hot Spy Writer on the Run," *Life*, 25 March 1966, p. 86.

9. Len Deighton, *Horse Under Water* (N. Y.: G. P. Putnam, 1968), p. 99.

10. Len Deighton, *The Billion Dollar Brain* (N. Y.: G. P. Putnam, 1966), p. 285.

11. *Horse Under Water*, p. 170; Len Deighton, *Funeral in Berlin* (N. Y.: G. P. Putnam, 1965), p. 191.

12. *Billion Dollar Brain*, p. 79.

13. *Funeral in Berlin*, p. 53.

14. *Ipcress File*, p. 276; *Funeral in Berlin*, p. 237.

15. *Ipcress File*, pp. 189-190.

16. *Ipcress File*, pp. 38, 46, 64; Len Deighton, *Spy Story* (N. Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 87.

17. *Funeral in Berlin*, p. 33; *Billion Dollar Brain*, p. 19.

18. Harper, *World of the Thriller*, p. 68.

19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), III, 50. Cited hereafter as *Works*.

20. Jones, *Revolution & Romanticism*, p. 390.

21. Emerson, "Experience," *Works*, III, 50.

22. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Works*, II, 53.

23. *Billion Dollar Brain*, pp. 197-198.

24. *Ipcress File*, p. 14.

25. *Ipcress File*, p. 167.

26. *Horse Under Water*, p. 99.

27. *Funeral in Berlin*, p. 295; *Billion Dollar Brain*, p. 137.

28. *Funeral in Berlin*, p. 191.

29. James V. D'Anna, untitled review, *Library Journal*, 91 (1966), 274, 276.

30. Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (N. Y.: Vanguard, 1951), pp. 108-109.

31. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 96, 97-98.