REST IN PEACE: THE 'CABARETS ILLUSIONNISTES' OF PARIS

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IN 1899, THE AMERICAN WRITER WILLIAM C. Morrow (1854–1923) wrote *Bohemian Paris of Today*, purporting to be from 'the notes of the student Edouard Cucuel' and providing us with the stories of a man who lived the life and experienced the entertainments that Paris had to offer at the turn of the twentieth century. The book includes a description of a visit to one of the city's famed cabarets:

> *As we neared the Place [Pigalle] we saw on the opposite side of the street two flickering iron lanterns that threw a ghastly green light down upon the barred dead-black shutters of the building, and caught the faces of the passers-by with sickly rays that took out all the life and transformed them into the semblance of corpses. Across the top of the closed black entrance were large white letters, reading simply: CABARET DU NÉANT.* [1]

One of three 'cabarets illusionnistes', the Cabaret du Néant (literally, 'cabaret of nothingness') displayed distinct echoes of the Phantasmagoria of a century earlier. It allowed its patrons to visit the realms of death and experience 'immediate disintegration'.[2] Lurid descriptions of the café can be found in Baedeker's travel guides and elsewhere: coffins used as tables, chandeliers made from skulls and bones, and skeletal guests. The other two establishments Baedeker counted as 'cabarets illusionnistes' were the Cabaret du Ciel (Heaven) and Cabaret de l'Enfer (Hell). Situated next to each other on the Boulevard de Clichy, these cafés promised Parisians a glimpse of what would await them beyond the grave, treating them to a taste of either heaven or hell. The iconic image of the devil's mouth entrance of the Cabaret de l'Enfer is still readily available today in the form of a decorative poster (Fig. 1).

1.The elaborate façade of the Cabaret d'Enfer, illustrated in a contemporary postcard (Mervyn Heard Collection)

Except for the aforementioned lurid descriptions, these cafés have been largely ignored by scholars. If they are mentioned, misconceptions abound: it has been said that the Cabaret du Néant was 'an imaginary café' and 'a decadent dream'.[3] Others have associated the illusions presented on the Boulevard de Clichy with demonstrations of the newly discovered X-Rays.[4] However, it is not difficult to find descriptions of all three cabarets in sources from the turn of the century. The establishments did exist, with but a single purpose: to entertain their audiences and (hopefully) to thrill them a little and chill them a little in a way that Baedeker described as 'being scarcely suitable for ladies.' I hope to clarify and put right some of these misconceptions by providing a description of the cabarets as they existed around 1900. By looking at the writings of those who visited the establishments, as well as photographic materials and travel guides, it is possible to shed light on a night out at the 'cabarets illusionnistes' and the way in which this was experienced by their audiences. Let us follow Morrow's students as they take a visiting friend for a night on the town:

> *'I suppose, gentlemen,' he suggested, 'that you are going to invite me to the opera.' [. . .]*
> *'The opera, old man!' cried Bishop. 'Why, you blessed idiot, you act like a tourist! The opera! You can go there any time! To-night we shall see Paris!' [. . .] 'The Boul' Mich' or Montmartre?' Bishop whispered to me.*
> *'Montmartre,' I replied; 'Heaven, Death, Hell.'* [5]

2. Advertising postcard from Cabaret d'Enfer (reproduced from Early Visual Media website)

TO HEAVEN, HELL AND BACK: THE CABARETS DU CIEL AND DE L'ENFER

Morrow's book is invaluable, as it is one of very few sources that provide us with a detailed description of the Cabarets du Ciel and de l'Enfer. Very little is to be found on the origins of either establishment. A souvenir postcard (Fig. 2) from the Cabaret de l'Enfer mentions 'A. Alexander' as the Directeur-Administrateur.[6] Other rumours include the idea that the two cafés were created by two Frenchmen who hated each other, and that the owner of Hell was an ex-clergyman whereas the proprietor of Heaven was a morally bankrupt ex-convict. There appears to be no further evidence to back up these claims, but the story of a convict who owns Heaven and a clergyman who owns Hell gives a certain attraction to the establishments. Although it might not have been true, it is quite possible that the information was not disputed and even encouraged: myth makes (in)famous! Lionel Richard, in his book *Cabaret, Cabarets*, cites the *Almanach Hachette* of 1897, which states that an illusionist by the name of Dorville was proprietor of both the Cabarets du Néant and du Ciel.[7]

Although it is difficult to obtain information on what went on backstage, in the area of management and ownership, Morrow provides a detailed account of what went on onstage in the two cabarets. The arrival of the three friends in Heaven is already an evocative image:

> *Presently we reached the gilded gates of Le Cabaret du Ciel. They were bathed in a cold blue light from above. Angels, gold-lined clouds, saints, sacred palms and plants, and other paraphernalia suggestive of the approach to St Peter's domain filled all the available space about the entrée. A bold white placard, 'Bock, 1 Franc', was displayed in the midst of it all. Dolorous*

NOTES

1. William C. Morrow; *Bohemian Paris of Today, from notes by Edouard Cucuel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1899), 264.
2. The term 'cabaret illusionniste' was first used in the fifteenth edition of Baedeker's guide *Paris and Environs with Routes from London to Paris: handbook for travellers* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1904) – see page 39. A number of editions were consulted, from 1898, 1900, 1904, 1907, 1910 and 1924.
3. Quoted in Andrew Roberts, ''How to be happy in Paris': Mina Loy and the Transvaluation of the Body' in *Cambridge Quarterly* XXVII(2) (1998), 129–47. This quote is from page 140.
4. See Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: performing science, magic and religion in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 15–16, and Richard F. Mould, *Mould's Medical Anecdotes, omnibus edition* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), 44–6.
5. Morrow, 253.
6. The postcard is available at the *Early Visual Media* website, users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/cabaret.html (address correct at time of going to press), which includes a number of images of the Cabaret de l'Enfer andCabaret du Néant.
7. Lionel Richard, *Cabaret, Cabarets!* (Paris: Plon, 1991), 262.

church music sounded within, and the heavens were unrolled as a scroll in all their tinsel splendour as we entered to the bidding of an angel.[8]

Once inside, the visitor would find a large number of angels acting as waiters, and would be welcomed with 'greetings from Heaven' and told to 'prepare to meet thy great Creator'. Morrow's student briefly described one of the waiters:

> *'Brothers, your orders! Command me, thy servant!' growled a ferocious angel at our elbows, with his accent de la Villette, and his brass halo a trifle askew.*[9]

Their drinks, each of which had been renamed to match the theme (the bock beer was referred to as 'heaven's own brew'), would soon arrive, after which the patrons were treated to a visit from St Peter himself:

> *Suddenly, without the slightest warning, the head of St Peter, whiskers and all, appeared in a hole in the sky, and presently all of him emerged, even to his ponderous keys clanging at his girdle. He gazed solemnly down upon the crowd at the tables and thoughtfully scratched his left wing. From behind a dark cloud he brought forth a vessel of white crockery (which was not a wash-bowl) containing (ostensibly) holy water. After several mysterious signs and passes with his bony hands he generously sprinkled the sinners below with a brush dipped in the water; and then, with a parting blessing, he slowly faded into mist.*[10]

Next, the visitors were invited to pay homage to a shrine which held an 'immense golden pig [sitting] sedately on his haunches, looking friendly and jovial', and this was followed by the actual show. After being admitted to the 'angel-room', patrons were treated to a spectacle of flying angels and could even join in:

> *[The volunteers] were conducted through a concealed door, and presently we beheld them soaring in the empyrean just as happy and serene as though they were used to being angels.*[11]

Albert Hoeckley, in a contemporary article in the *New York Times*, described the events at the Cabaret du Ciel as 'a stupid sacrilegious performance [...], the object being to ridicule church services and everything of a religious nature.'[12]

What is interesting about these descriptions are the feelings that the venue evokes, both in the students and in us as readers. The atmosphere, constituted of clouds, tinsel and organ music, is described as having a 'depressing rather than a solemn effect'.[13] Although there was some use of humour, as demonstrated by the renaming of the drinks and the worship of the pig, the establishment appears to have been lacking refinement in other areas (most notably the gruff-voiced angel and St Peter being reduced to a ticket collector as the patrons filed into the angel-room), which seems to dim the silver lining around the clouds of Heaven.

The Cabaret de l'Enfer offered a type of entertainment largely similar to that of the Cabaret du Ciel: an opportunity to drink and dine in the appropriate atmosphere, followed by a short show. The postcard mentioned earlier regarding the ownership of the café lists some of the delights that a visitor could expect, including the 'Dance of the Damned' and the 'Torture of the Damned'.[14] The famous entrance of the café was described in some detail by Morrow:

> *We passed though a large, hideous, fanged, open mouth in an enormous face from which shone eyes of blazing crimson. Curiously enough, it adjoined heaven, whose cool blue lights contrasted strikingly with the fierce ruddiness of hell. Red-hot bars and gratings through which flaming coals gleamed appeared in the walls within the red mouth.*[15]

Inside, the students were greeted by the sight of a 'cauldron [suspended] over a fire' and a group of 'devil musicians' playing a selection from *Faust*, 'while red imps stood by, prodding with red-hot irons those who lagged in their performance.' Again, there was a renaming of beverages (black coffee with cognac became a 'seething bumper of molten sins, with a dash of brimstone intensifier') and a visit by a famous face, in this case Satan himself. It is quite possible that a number of well-known demonic characters frequented the Cabaret de l'Enfer: another postcard shows an actor portraying Mephistopheles, and Hoeckler's article even stated that all waiters were dressed in this manner. By contrast, Morrow described the staff as 'imps'.[16]

The design of the Cabaret de l'Enfer seems to have been quite intricate: Morrow writes about a scene where

> *crevices in the walls of this room ran with streams of molten gold and silver, and here and there were caverns lit up by smouldering fires from which thick smoke issued, and vapours emitting the odours of a volcano. Flames would suddenly burst from clefts in the rocks, and thunder rolled through the caverns.*[17]

Hoeckley mentioned 'glass tables, illuminated by coloured electric lights underneath', whereas Morrow's description was more intriguing and spoke of red tables that seemed to light up only when someone sat down:

> *[He] seated himself at one of them. Instantly it became aglow with a mysterious light, which kept flaring up and disappearing in an erratic fashion; flames darted from the walls, fires crackled and roared.*[18]

The description of the show itself is quite brief and differs greatly between the two sources. Morrow mentions a visit to the 'hot chamber', which contains a small stage:

> *a large green snake crawled out upon this, and suddenly it was transformed into a red devil with exceedingly long, thin legs, encased in tights that were ripped in places. He gave some wonderful contortion feats. A poor little white Pierrot came on and assisted the red devil in black art performances.*[19]

This seems to point to an act consisting of acrobatics and perhaps some magic tricks. The *New York Times* account, however, describes how

> *[the visitors] are ushered into a small theatre where a performance is given. This consists principally of dissolving views, in which coloured lights are skilfully managed.*[20]

If this is the case, we might be looking at a magic lantern show, featuring a number of dissolving views and slipping slides (these

3. The 'Room of Intoxication' at the Cabaret du Néant, shown in a contemporary postcard (Mervyn Heard Collection)

8. Morrow, 255.
9. Morrow, 257. The 'accent de la Villette' suggests the angel spoke the vernacular of suburban Paris.
10. Morrow, 258.
11. Morrow, 262
12. Albert Herman Hoeckley, 'Quaint inns and cabarets of London and Paris', *New York Times* 28 July 1901, page 9 of magazine supplement.
13. Morrow, 258.
14. *Early Visual Media* website, as above; my translations.
15. Morrow, 279.
16. Morrow, 280.
17. Morrow, 280.
18. Morrow, 280.
19. Morrow, 285.
20. Hoeckley, op. cit.

might explain the 'contortion feats' mentioned by Morrow). Another explanation is, quite simply, that the show had been changed over time: during the visit of Morrow's students, in or prior to 1899, the 'hot chamber' consisted of a live performance, yet by the time of the publication of the newspaper article in 1901, this had been changed to a magic lantern show (perhaps following the success of the optical entertainments at the Cabaret du Néant, as will be described shortly). Unfortunately, no visual evidence or additional descriptions have come to light to provide conclusive evidence for one of these two options.

'REQUIESCAT IN PACE' AND 'NO SMOKING': THE CABARET DU NÉANT

Source material on the Cabaret du Néant is available in larger quantities, ranging from descriptions of the venue to explorations of the techniques behind the effects, as well as postcards, illustrations and photographic materials (Fig. 3). All of these are contemporary sources: the venue has been largely ignored by today's researchers, despite the fact that the illusions shown in the Cabaret du Néant have an important position in the history of visual media and optical effects.

The history of the management of the Cabaret du Néant is rather muddled, as we have seen with the Cabarets du Ciel and de l'Enfer. The proprietor of this 'Tavern of the Dead' was, as mentioned by Lionel Richard, a man named Dorville, described by Simon During as 'an illusionist who would go on to act in Méliès's films'[21]. The dates at which the Cabaret first opened its doors and finally disappeared are similarly vague. No such information exists for the Cabarets du Ciel and de l'Enfer, and although it can be found that the Cabaret du Néant opened in 1892, the original source on which this is based is unclear. Similarly, no information on a closing date has been found; the 1924 edition of Baedeker's travel guide still lists all three establishments.[22]

The Cabaret du Néant consisted of three distinct sections: the Salle d'Intoxication ('Room of Intoxication'), the 'Room of Disintegration' and the 'Hall of Spectres and Phantoms', all of which contained optical illusions and trickery.[23] Upon entering the café, visitors were greeted with the words 'Welcome, O weary wanderer, to the realm of death! Enter! Choose your coffin, and be seated beside it!'[24] These coffins were located in a chamber

> *dimly lighted with wax tapers, and a large chandelier intricately devised from human skulls and arms, with funeral candles held in their fleshless fingers, gave it a small quota of light. [...] The walls were decorated with skulls and bones, skeletons in grotesque attitudes, battle-pictures, and guillotines in action. Death, carnage, assassination were the dominant note, set in black hangings and illuminated with mottoes on death.*[25]

Morrow also noted the 'utter absence of spirit and levity among the other guests'. In contrast, Ellsworth Douglass, writing in the British illustrated monthly *Royal Magazine* in 1899, described an atmosphere that was more light-hearted, where jokes (mostly at the expense of new visitors) were numerous, coming from the proprietor, his attendants and those seated at adjacent tables. Whether the scene was thought joyful or depressing, the *New York Times* clearly voiced disapproval: 'It is a gruesome sight to see a number of persons seated around coffins sipping 'un grand bock' or 'un petit bock''.[26]

In a similar way to the Cabarets du Ciel and de l'Enfer, this establishment also renamed its drinks to suit the atmosphere, in this case listing them as various poisons and diseases: at the Cabaret du Néant, one could order a dose of 'strychnine', 'cholera', 'arsenic' or 'pestilence'. The dinner menu (Fig. 4) reads as a list of bad puns: 'entrées' (starters) at the Cabaret du Néant are 'enterrées' (burials); 'légumes' (vegetables) become 'l'exhume' (exhumation); 'desserts assortis' (assorted desserts) are now 'décès assortis' (assorted deceased).[27] Although this renaming can be seen as the product of the mind of someone with a rather morbid sense of humour, it did have its effects on the patrons. Morrow describes how one of the group of students could not be persuaded to drink the ordered beverage as 'he seemed unable to banish the idea that they were laden with disease germs'.[28]

After all visitors were seated, one of the attendants spoke up to

Dîner des Squelettes

Invitation

Frères
il faut
Moult rire !

Enfer et
contre tout

MENU
rédigé pour la faim du monde
d'aprés l'art d'accomoder les restes

Peaux d'âges
Riz aux larmes (Persil et Cercueil)

Hors-d'Œuvres
Peur et raidis verts
Huitres d'os tendres

Poissons
Sole pleureur - Raie quiem

Enterrées
Grognons aux truffes du Père Ricord
Glas double
Râles en salmis
Veuf à la morgue
Ci-gît got rôti

L'Exhume
Cardons du poêle
Macabroni italienne
Petits pois trinaires
Choux-pleurs
Homme de terre en robe de chantre

Bombes Funèbres

Décès assortis
Corbillard de fruits
Brie ez pour lui

Bois-son
Château La Pompe Funèbre 1921
Petits vers - Bière garantie 10 ans
Grog Maure

SPECTRE-TRAC CANCER

Le Posthume est de rigueur,
les invités pouvant être reconduits en voiture à leur dernière demeure.

4. 'Dinner of the skeletons' menu card from Cabaret du Néant (Mervyn Heard Collection)

5. The 'Room of Disintegration' at the Cabaret du Néant, shown in a contemporary postcard (Mervyn Heard Collection)

21. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: the cultural power of secular magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 147. Méliès was the pioneering French film maker Georges Méliès (1861–1938).
22. The entry on the 'cabaret illusionnistes' appears on p. 34 of the 1924 edition, after having been omitted in the 1910 edition. This might point to an earlier closing date and later revival (as seems to happen with a number of these types of establishments), but there is no evidence that fully supports this idea.
23. The French name is known of only the first room; the other two are from the text by Douglass. Judging from the postcards, the other sections of the Cabaret du Néant were referred to as different 'caveaux' or caverns.
24. Ellsworth Douglass, 'Jesting with death', *Royal Magazine* Vol. 1 No. 6 (April 1899), 500–5.
25. Morrow, 265.
26. Hoeckley, op. cit.
27. The menu is reproduced in Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: the secret life of the magic lantern* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006), 249.
28. Morrow, 268

call 'the attention of the company to the queer pictures on the walls of this room'.[29] These pictures presented a number of displays: a Pierrot on a rooftop, a battle-scene, a dancing crowd, all of whom instantly disappeared and turned into a grim display of death and bones. Mervyn Heard notes that these changes were 'probably not lantern projections but dioramic front- and back-lit paintings', and the detailed descriptions given by Douglass support this suggestion.[30] After having seen these pictures, the patrons were guided through a number of passages into the second space, the Room of Disintegration (Fig. 5):

> *All the visitors rose, and, bearing each a taper, passed in single file into a narrow, dark passage faintly illuminated with sickly green lights… The cross effects of green and yellow lights on the face of the groping procession were more startling than picturesque. The way was lined with bones, skulls and fragments of human bodies.*[31]

Here, the real show began: the visitors seated themselves on one of the benches, after which there was a call for volunteers. Those who were called up to the front were placed in a coffin, standing on some wooden blocks, and their bodies covered in a white shroud, so only the head was visible. After these preparations, the volunteer

> *gradually dissolves or fades away and in his place appears a skeleton in the coffin. Again, at the word of command the skeleton in its turn slowly disappears, and the draped figure of the spectator appears again.*[32]

Morrow's narrative of the illusion was more lurid, describing a young girl being in the coffin, after which

> *her face slowly became white and rigid; her eyes sank; her lips tightened across her teeth; her cheeks took on the hollowness of death, – she was dead. But it did not end with that. From white the face slowly grew livid… then purplish black… The eyes visibly shrank into their greenish-yellow sockets… Slowly the hair fell away… The nose melted away into a putrid spot. The whole face became a semi-liquid mass of corruption.*[33]

Various versions of this illusion can be found: Douglass describes how a volunteer was turned into a skeleton, after which the skeleton dissolved to nothingness, the volunteer having been removed from the coffin through a panel in the back. Morrow tells us how a young girl was turned into a banker; and the volunteers described by Hopkins simply turned to a skeleton and then back to their normal selves. In each case, the techniques behind this illusion were similar, relying on a 'Pepper's Ghost' effect. Hopkins provides a detailed explanation of the illusions that could be seen at the Cabaret du Néant:

> *Directly in front of the coffin, crossing the stage obliquely, is a large sheet of the clearest plate glass, which offers no impediment to the view of the coffin with its occupant, when the latter is fully illuminated. At one side of the stage, in the back of the picture, is a painting of a skeleton in a coffin with its own set of Argand burners. It is screened from view. When strongly illuminated, and when the lights of the real coffin are turned down, the spectators see reflected from the glass a brilliant image of the pictured coffin and skeleton. By turning up one set of burners as the others are turned down a perfect dissolving effect is obtained, skeleton replacing spectator and vice versa at the will of the exhibitor.*[34]

This explains the reasons for the shroud and the use of wooden blocks: in order to create a proper dissolving effect, perfect registration was essential. The volunteer was placed in the coffin and, as described, the head was aligned with the reflected head of the skeleton. The shroud hid the rest of the body and removed any difficulties related to the height or stature of the volunteer, thus creating a perfect illusion. Morrow's description of the space contains information on the conditions in which the illusion was performed:

> *At one side two tall candles were burning, but their feeble light was insufficient even to disclose the presence of the black walls of the chamber or indeed indicate that anything but unending blackness extended heavenward. There was not a thing to catch or reflect a single ray of the light and thus become visible in the blackness.*[35]

This lack of light is likely to have been established to enhance the effectiveness of the illusion.

The illusion of the Room of Disintegration was followed by the final part of the show, the Hall of Spectres and Phantoms (this space and its illusions are absent from the account presented by Morrow). Visitors were guided by a procession of mourners to a room, in which 'a little grotto in the wall of the tomb in front affords an opening for the miniature stage. At either side of the opening are lanterns held by skeletons.'[36] A table and chair were set on the stage and a member of the audience was invited to come up and take a seat. However, as Douglass warned, 'if you wish to be made the butt of all manner of jokes going, accept the invitation'. The illusions that followed again made use of the Pepper's Ghost effect. The key to this part of the show was that the spectators could see the projected images and phantom that appeared before them, while the person seated on the stage could not. Douglass describes a number of tableaux that followed:

> *The grinning girl with her finger on the table […] is not really there, but is merely a reflection. That is where the joke on you comes in. You see nothing in the vacant space, whilst the audience sees the girl grinning at you, ogling you, and trying to flirt with you. The spectators laugh uproariously, while you shift uneasily in your chair and wonder what it is all about.*
>
> *Then a bouquet appears on a table besides you, and you are invited to drink in its perfume. You see no bouquet, but you bend your head as if to smell it, and keep on doing so, determined to act your part well. The crowd roars with laughter, for the bouquet has changed in a flash to a dead rabbit, which you seem to enjoy equally well.*[37]

Hopkins mentions the image of a glass being seen on the table and the volunteer being invited to have a drink (which, of course, resulted in the volunteer fumbling for a glass he could not see).In 1926 Josh Chancellor described a dissolving effect where a female spectator was called up to the stage:

> *Unfortunate feminine worm! Without any warning her outer garments vanish, and she is made to appear in some very provocative underclothing. She is quite unconscious of this immodest proceeding, and the expression of apprehensive astonishment with which she stares at the audience – who are laughing in simple, child-like delight – is worth the entire ten francs.*[38]

Douglass, writing some 25 years prior to Chancellor's description, tells us about a more innocent version of this last effect, where a girl in a plain black frock, through use of a dissolving effect, suddenly found herself dressed in a light, satin evening dress. This projection, in the versions described by both Douglass and Chancellor, signified the end of the performance.

It is easy to see the significance of the effects presented at the Cabaret du Néant (and possibly the Cabaret de l'Enfer, if the article in the *New York Times* is correct) for the history of optical illusions. This 'Tavern of Death' was using the relatively modern Pepper's Ghost technique to take the horrific entertainments of the phantasmagoria to the next level. Instead of merely providing its patrons with images of skeletons and ghosts, they were invited to interact with them and even become a ghoul themselves.

Next to the horrific entertainments provided by the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, the wax tableaux at the Musée Grévin and even the bodies on display at the Paris morgue (open to the public at this time), the 'cabarets illusionnistes' tapped into a Parisian fascination with both optical illusions and the macabre. The 'cabarets illusionnistes' provide an interesting insight into the way in which some people at the turn of the twentieth century liked to spend a good night out: amongst angels, demons and skeletons. The links to the phantasmagoria of a hundred years earlier, as well as to the contemporary Grand-Guignol and later establishments from early cinema-spook shows to today's Dracula-themed pubs, should not be ignored. It would be a shame if knowledge of them went down the same road as the illusions they presented: changing from flesh into skeleton and, finally, leaving nothing but dust.

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28. Morrow, 268.
29. Douglass, op. cit.
30. Heard, 252-3.
31. Morrow, 270.
32. Albert A. Hopkins, *Magic: stage illusions and scientific diversions, including trick photography* (London, 1897), 56.
33. Morrow, 271–2.
34. Hopkins, 59.
35. Morrow, 270.
36. Douglass, op. cit.
37. Douglass, op. cit.
38. Quoted in Roberts, op. cit., 141.