

That is not freedom, that is taking license.  
The Pitfalls in performing Morton Feldman's Graph Scores

Between 1950 and 1967, American composer Morton Feldman (1926-1987) wrote seventeen pieces for which he designed a totally new notational system. Both he and John Cage describe how its invention was almost a casual act, done while waiting at Cage's apartment for dinner to be ready. Feldman's recollection: "But the initial concept of the grid - Oh, it's like one of those things that you don't know is going to have significance afterwards...I was living in the same building as John Cage and he invited me to dinner...It was while waiting for the wild rice that I just sat down at his desk and picked up a piece of note paper and started to doodle. And what I doodled was a freely drawn page of graph paper - and what emerged were high, middle and low categories. It was just automatic - I never had any conversation about it heretofore."<sup>1</sup> Cage's recollection is similar: "when I was living in new york I was often with david tudor morton feldman christian wolff earle brown in the place where I lived that had a beautiful view of the east river...feldman went into the room with the piano [and shortly] came back with his first piece of graph music where on graph paper he simply put numbers and indicated high middle and low how many high notes how many middle notes how many low notes and nothing else there were squares that he left empty so there were no notes there at all after he showed it to me and to david tudor david tudor went to the piano and played it it was a great experience"<sup>2</sup>

Feldman's need for a totally new way of music notation is best described in his article "Predeterminate/Indeterminate", in which he says: "Between 1950 and 1951 four composers - John Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff and myself - became friends, saw each other constantly - and something happened. Joined by the pianist David Tudor, each of us in his own way contributed to a concept of music in which various elements (rhythm, pitch, dynamics, etc.) were decontrolled. Because this music was not "fixed," it could not be notated in the old way. Each new thought, each new idea within this thought, suggested its own notation." [...] "Up to now the various elements of music (rhythm, pitch, dynamics, etc.) were only recognizable in terms of their formal relationship to each other. As controls are given up, one finds that these elements lose their initial, inherent identity. But it is just because of this identity that these elements can be unified within the composition. Without this identity there can be no unification. It follows then, that an indeterminate music can lead only to catastrophe. This catastrophe we allowed to take place. Behind it was sound - which unified everything. Only by "unfixing" the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves - not as symbols, or memories which were memories of other music to begin with."<sup>3</sup>

Feldman, together with Cage, Wolff and Brown, clearly searched for a way of dealing with what they felt was an obsession of contemporary composers with ordering every element in every work, something that was preventing sound itself from being free. This might be seen as a direct response to the insistence of the main figures on the European (Darmstadt) scene - Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Goeyvaerts - on the necessity of total serialism, in which all parameters of a composition are subjected to the strictest possible rules, were it not for the fact that strict, or total serialism really dates from 1951, and so was not around yet as they came up with their attempts to free up sound.<sup>4</sup> The antagonism towards this way of thinking can be seen as an attempt to distinguish the American contemporary composers from their European colleagues.

Feldman commented that "*Projection II* for flute, trumpet, violin and cello - one of the first graph pieces - was my first experience with this new thought."<sup>5</sup> My desire was not to 'compose,' but to project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here. In order not to involve the performer (i.e. myself) in memory (relationships),

and because the sounds no longer had an inherent symbolic shape, I allowed for indeterminacies in regard to pitch."<sup>6</sup> An interesting remark here is that when he talks about the performer he adds "i.e. myself", the implication being that the composer is not just the person writing down the piece, but at the same time performing it.

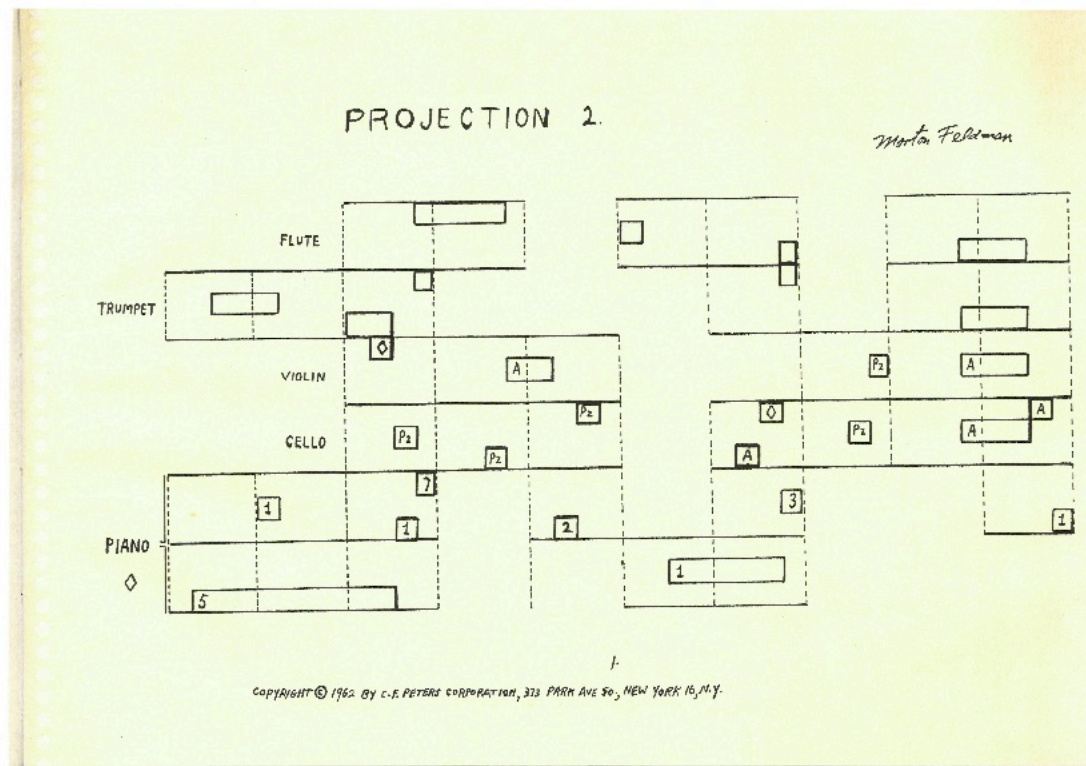


Fig. 1: Morton Feldman, *Projection 2* (1951), page 1 (New York, London, Frankfurt: C.F. Peters Corporation EP 6940, 1962)

In the same article, Feldman makes it clear that leaving performers to choose the exact pitches is not the same as providing freedom for the composer: "For myself, most of my observations about my work are after the fact, and a technical discussion of my methodology would be quite misleading. I do not feel I am being "free" when I use a process that gives up control of pitches in one composition, rhythm and dynamics in another, etc., etc. Thus, I am left in a suspended state with regard to my role, but in a hopeful one with regard to the eventual outcome. What I control is my will – something far more difficult than a page of music. If I want my music to demonstrate anything, it is that 'nature and human nature are one'. Unlike Stockhausen, I don't feel called upon to forcefully "mediate" between the two."<sup>7</sup>

If we look at the graph scores an initial idea might be that the performer, because they are totally free to choose any pitch they want, provided they stick to the prescribed register, could treat the piece as a kind of *guided improvisation*. Pitch was totally free, and in addition, in the pieces after the *Projection* series, rhythm was quite free. If we look at Feldman's ideas about improvisation however, we see that this was not at all on the composer's mind.

Feldman did not have many good words to say about improvisation, even though his ideas of what improvisation is could be said to be somewhat limited. He saw improvisation as something that would always be reliant on pre-existing forms, where there was no possibility of the kind of musical development he was looking for in his own music, which relied on a constant deep involvement with the act of conscious and

concentrated flexibility of thinking. In a conversation with improviser and composer Misha Mengelberg (Middelburg, June 1985) he said:

"I always wonder about the flexibility [of improvisation]. It's either "in the style of..." I think improvisation is also the ability to do other than what you are doing. This is not a criticism. This is an observation. And one of the observations I would make about the improvisation outside the fantastic tour de force, say, technically, that Charlie Parker could do or Miles Davis – we are not talking about that – but that's all within the continuity and the consistency of a certain vocabulary.

MM: Yes. That is the luggage.

MF: But to me, I think, it's a lot of luggage. But I never understood the nature of improvisation even if someone would improvise, say, a fugue...

MM: It has nothing to do with spontaneity. It can be an aspect.

MF: Okay, but that is an important qualification for me. It's important to hear you saying that it does not have to do with spontaneity but it might. So it's the monolithic aspect. In other words: for me it's a little too monolithic. And I think it's very much just like a fugue, that is, you cannot have many things in it. Like the fugue just has one basic... tune. I am not talking about this old-fashioned improvisation with a quote. [Sings a short melody] I am talking about it's like the fugue where you have one basic idea and then you carry it out – in terms of beginning, middle, end. There's always a setup, you are always setting something up.

MM: But in composition you have the same qualities.

MF: I don't work that way. That's the only reason why I am willing to take you on with the subject."<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, same place, but a conversation with the Dutch jazz musician and journalist Frits Lagerwerff he talked about going to hear Thelonious Monk: "I liked his tunes, the way they went fishing around and things like that. It wasn't as if I didn't hear it. I used to go and I used to go quite often but the search for improvisation and that it was a metaphor of freedom...

*And chance...*

No chance, working with the same structures all the time. In other words, there were no surprises in those structures just like there were no surprises in a Stockhausen structure. Because I saw from where it came, and I saw how it was made."<sup>9</sup>

As Feldman does not want to prescribe anything but the basic information on register, the musicians have to give a lot of thought about what kind of pitch material they want to use for the piece. This is closely linked to the idea of idiom, style, and period, but the matter is not at all straightforward. As Feldman says nothing at all about the nature of the pitch (sound) material to be chosen, each performer is in principle free to make their own decisions, opening up the way to avenues of thinking that would be correct if one only looks at the letter of the law, but are very problematic with regards to the spirit. One could easily decide, because it is the kind of material one prefers to play, to make a wholly tonal version of the part, and only to use pitches that fit into standard tonal harmonic rules. There is no provision in the instructions to counter this. Or, one could make a non-chromatic version, that is to say, include intervals smaller than a minor second, and make a microtonal version. Again, this would not be against the rules given. As long as players adhere to the general high (or low) register, any pitch chosen would be acceptable in theory.

Another choice that has been made by some performers is to assign one single pitch to each category, especially in pieces like *Projection I* for solo cello, where there are a total of nine categories to be performed: arco, harmonics, and pizzicato, and for each of these three registers, high, middle, and low. This reductive approach is not incorrect per se, but is a very severely limited interpretation of Feldman's instruction "Any tone within the

ranges indicated may be sounded".<sup>10</sup> We should also note that in quite a few graph scores, Feldman uses the word 'sound', not 'pitch', which strictly speaking could imply that performers are free to produce non-pitched sounds. However, this might be a very free interpretation of the rules. With only a few exceptions, generally because the instrumentation of the piece uses non-pitched percussion instruments (e.g. ...*Out of 'Last Pieces', Marginal Intersection*), Feldman's musical thinking, and as a result his use of instruments tends to be very much pitch-oriented. We tend to think of Feldman and Cage as belonging to the same category of composers, but actually Feldman has never really been that interested in allowing all kinds of external sounds to enter his music, and he has not really used extended techniques in any of his pieces, making it highly unlikely that he would have seen the word 'sounds' as anything else than meaning 'pitched sounds'. Still, if taken literally, one could make a case for having the freedom to include non-pitched sounds.

In practice, these decisions would go against Feldman's idea of the sound of the work. To understand why, we have to look at the specific performance practice of Feldman's works in the 1950s and the general performance attitudes of the time. Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff, the group of composers known as the New York School, all working in New York City in the 1950s, would generally write for a few dedicated musicians, performers who knew exactly what was expected from them, who were happy to work closely with the composer to make sure the work was given an interpretation that came closest to what was needed. The circle around Feldman was quite small, and consisted chiefly of the pianist David Tudor, Feldman himself, John Cage (as pianist and conductor), as well as cellist Seymour Barab – who very probably gave the first performance of Feldman's first graph piece *Projection 1* (1950) – and violinist Frances Magnes, who is the dedicatee of *Projection 4* (1951).

Pieces were generally composed with these musicians in mind, and there was a close collaboration on every aspect of the performance. Feldman could be sure that the works would be performed according to his wishes, and the performers would be well versed in his idiom and musical language. Problems would often arise when pieces were performed by larger groups not specialised in playing new music, especially orchestras. Most orchestral players were quite hostile to avant-garde pieces and their non-standard demands. There are numerous stories of performances being totally sabotaged by players either not taking anything in the piece seriously, or trying their best to subvert the rules of a particular composition as much as possible. In his John Cage biography *Begin again*, Kenneth Silverman described a performance of his *Atlas Eclipticalis* with *Winter Music* by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein in 1964: "The seventy or so Philharmonic instrumentalists, their contact microphones attached to a bank of amplifiers, were supposed to play through Cage's piece for eight minutes. Instead, many of them improvised freely, ran through scales, quoted other works, talked, fooled with the electronic devices, or simply sat on the stage without playing. "They acted criminally," Cage said, some even stomping on their microphones. Christian Wolff was present and thought the musicians "shocking, really, really awful. ... They deliberately sabotaged; they killed the piece".<sup>11</sup>

Jorge Mester, who conducted the orchestra for a performance of Feldman's dance score *Ixion* at the New York State Theatre in 1965, recalls: "It was an unfortunate but sadly hilarious occasion. I dutifully rehearsed the orchestra as best I could, making sure they understood Feldman's instructions. We then proceeded to the pit for the dress (and only) run-through. About eight minutes into the dance, one of the dancers leapt from the wings, whereupon the trumpet player tooted a tune from *The Grand Canyon Suite* [by Ferde Grofé] – the orchestra fell apart with mirth and was unable to continue".<sup>12</sup> Feldman recalls another instance where orchestra players clearly sabotaged a piece: "I would designate a certain amount of notes to play in the graph things, and I would hear 'Yankee

Doodle' coming out of the horn section. The players decide together, before the concert, actually to sabotage it – and they decided in this particular section they were going to play 'Yankee Doodle', with the amount of notes called for and in the register of the score".<sup>13</sup> These would have been quite extreme situations – but even when the players tried to follow the instructions to the letter, the result was not always to Feldman's liking. He describes one example an interview with Dore Ashton: "...even though in my own mind I was hearing sound very abstractly, every time – for example, one particular piece<sup>14</sup> where it's most obvious – every time the xylophone would have, say, four seconds for a solo situation in which, even though I would give him the amount of sounds to play in that particular situation, even though I would tell him how to play it, what he actually played was of such a horrendous nature that I realized that there was something wrong."<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, even though Feldman instructs the player to freely choose any sounds they want, it isn't that simple, as there seems to be an unwritten requirement that the pitches chosen should be in line with the composer's preference. As a performer you can take several different attitudes, depending on your personal idea about interpretation and freedom. Just looking at the score, without any external source material to draw upon, any pitch, or even any unpitched sound would do equally well, as long as they are high-sounding where indicated, and low-sounding where indicated. This line of thinking implies that a score contains all necessary information to make a performance according to the composer's wishes. Even though this performance philosophy gained a lot of traction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and quite a few composers would maintain that performers only need to follow the score, and certainly not insert their own interpretation, it might not be the correct course of action here. It is clear from looking at the graphic scores that a lot of decisions are to be made by the performer: not just the sounds, but often also the exact placement, and the exact duration within the boxes. Therefore, some level of interpretation is definitely needed, leading us to the next question: how large should this level of interpretation be? In other words, does the performer still have a responsibility towards the composer that informs the choice of sounds, or do they have license to make the sounds completely their own?

It turns out that, even though they are often regarded as composers with similar ideas about the role of the performer, Feldman's idea of freedom was very different from Cage's. Cage wanted to free himself, and the performers, from their own "likes and dislikes", and was not interested in choosing one particular sound over another: "...one may give up the desire to control sounds, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments".<sup>16</sup> Feldman never followed this line of thought, as he was too much preoccupied with the beauty of sounds and pitches, and not at all with allowing performers to do whatever they wanted. Research is needed into the specific sound world of Feldman's music at that time.

As John Cage remarked, "Morty's notated music is Morty playing his graph music".<sup>17</sup> This implies that the exact nature of sound that Feldman wanted for his graph music was no different from that of his non-graph pieces, and that therefore the freedom given to the performer was not absolute, but an invitation to choose freely within the appropriate musical language. Feldman in the same conversation admitted, "And that was the problem I had".<sup>18</sup> In an interview with British composer Howard Skempton from 1977, he makes additional remarks on musicians' attitudes towards pitch and rhythmical choices, which would eventually lead him away from graph notation, and back to conventionally-notated scores:

HS: [...] Possibly in the graph pieces people would do things which would distract from what you were trying to do. You were trying to create a weight, and they would play a

major third, or a triad. You would say that's not a weight of three notes, that's a triad. So, this is probably what led you to fully notate works.

MF: I found that – and Cage talks about this now himself continuously – people mistake freedom for license. And I feel that there's a problem. There's also a problem in terms of the conventional training of musicians. Say, for example, a flute player, who could jump around much more readily than a clarinet player, huh? Because the training of a clarinetist is conventional [...] They would play a very conventional type of passages, you see. That's the problem. Certain instruments had to prepare passages because the whole make-up of the instrument, in a sense, is diatonic. Like the harp. You know, I'd never adopted a pitch structure, how to get my pitches. But I hear them. I hear them like this! [snaps fingers] No problem! I hear and I write down the pitches. There's no problem! It's just nothing! So I decided to do it myself. Also there was a problem where everybody was very metric-oriented. [...] That they were only interested, and still are only interested, that if they see a note on the beat, it's a note on the beat. And everything people cannot understand, say the difference between breathing a sound and its metric unit.<sup>19</sup>

Because the notational system is, at least initially, quite unfamiliar to the performer, there is a further barrier between the marks on the page and the action to be taken. Every musician should be able to transpose the elements of standard musical notation into the necessary performance, but in the graph pieces the process is slower. In the pieces with relatively little material and a slow tempo this is not too much of a problem, and it is entirely possible to perform the pieces from the score provided. However, there are a couple of graph pieces that are extremely full of information. The two *Intersections* that Feldman wrote for David Tudor, and *Ixion*, have so much material in – at least in the case of the *Intersections* – such a fast tempo, playing from the score is more or less impossible. Performers would need to think about possible solutions; the one that immediately comes to mind is to make a fixed version of the score in standard music notation. This is what Tudor did for both *Intersection 3* and the two-piano version of *Ixion*. Cage prepared performance material for the ensemble version of *Ixion* but was aware of the conceptual problems this would cause. In a radio conversation with Feldman in 1967, he remarked: "There've been so many problems. Remember that interesting one with, again, that piece of yours that Merce Cunningham used, 'Ixion', where it was written on graph and used numbers and that was the piece, of course, and that was the way to read it. But through the exigencies of rehearsals and so forth, I translated it into something conventional – with quarter notes, you remember? – which was not what the piece was, but which permitted the musicians to quickly play it. Where the numbers meant that they would have had to devote themselves in a way that they actually didn't have the time or inclination to do."<sup>20</sup>

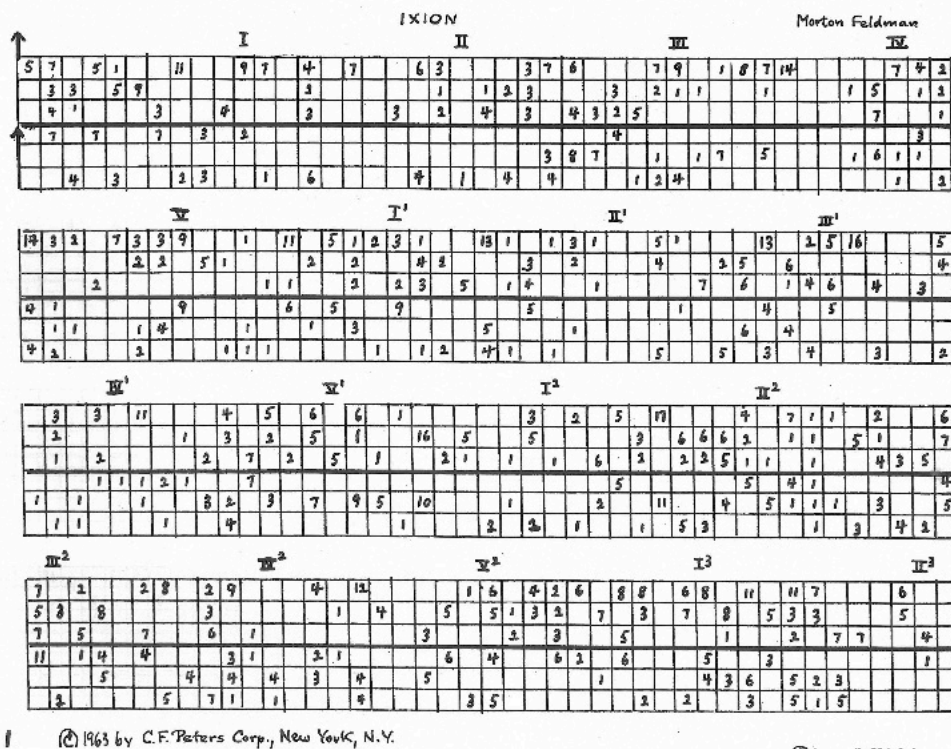


Fig. 2: Morton Feldman, *Ixion* (1958), version for 2 pianos, page 1 (New York, London, Frankfurt: C.F. Peters Corporation EP 6926a, 1963)

Tudor did not have any qualms about making fixed versions; he did this with every piece using an open form of notation giving the performer amounts of freedom. Composers were usually happy for him to do so, as they knew that he would always try to be faithful to the sound-world of the piece and would rather fix one accurate version of the score than go against the musical wishes of the author.

A kind of freedom totally unacceptable to Feldman would be to change the instrumentation of a piece. Even though the pitch material and to some extent the rhythms would be left up to the performer, colour is not an element given any kind of freedom. Feldman has always been extremely clear and strict about this, as instrumentation and colour were always amongst his chief concerns, and he said on multiple occasions that it was impossible for him to write down any note without knowing exactly which instrument would be playing it. Any attempt by a performer to change the instrumentation would be met with a strong 'absolutely not'. When Cornelius Cardew wrote to him with such a request, Feldman told him "No, please, don't. Because those pieces don't exist without this instrumentation".<sup>21</sup> In the lecture in Middelburg where he recalls this request he goes on to say: "The instrumentation is everything. It's its structure... At that particular time I didn't give the pitch. I needed the other compensating things to glue the piece together. So if he's going to just give any kind of instrument it was too revolutionary for me."<sup>22</sup> There have been performances of some of the graph pieces with an alternative instrumentation, but these should be a gross infringement of the ideas of the composer.

One might of course maintain that all this is not very serious, and that it should be seen as belonging to the kind of freedom that the performer is allowed to take within the rules, but I would maintain that, at least with the music of a composer like Feldman, who had very strong views on how his music should sound, a performer should aim to play any

piece as close to the intentions of the composer as possible, doing the requisite research to know what these might have been. As John Cage would say if someone asked him if they could do something in a composition that he did not design it to do: "Well, you can always write your own piece..."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Feldman (2006) p. 153

<sup>2</sup> Cage (1990) p. 238-240 (punctuation by Cage)

<sup>3</sup> Feldman (2000) p. 35

<sup>4</sup> The Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, which were founded in 1946, are generally seen as the birthplace of strict serialism in 1951.

<sup>5</sup> Feldman forgets to include the piano in the instrumental line-up.

<sup>6</sup> Feldman (2000) p. 5-6

<sup>7</sup> Feldman (2000) p. 17-18

<sup>8</sup> Feldman (2008) p. 36-38

<sup>9</sup> Feldman (2008) p. 798

<sup>10</sup> Feldman (1961) n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Silverman (2010) p. 201

<sup>12</sup> Cline (2016) p. 69

<sup>13</sup> Cline (2016) p. 45

<sup>14</sup> Feldman does not name the piece, but was probably talking about *Marginal Intersection* for orchestra (1951)

<sup>15</sup> Cline (2016) p. 45

<sup>16</sup> Cage (1967) p. 10

<sup>17</sup> Feldman (2006) p. 122

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Skempton (1977) n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Cage & Feldman (1993) p. 181

<sup>21</sup> Feldman (2008) p. 852

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*



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