

Poché Parisienne: The Interior Urbanity of Nineteenth Century Paris

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The brilliance of Haussmannian Paris, its grand planning and imposing façades, preserves the specter of an earlier time. It maintains a trace of the medieval Paris that was inherited by the July monarchy in the earlier half of the nineteenth century: a world of secret and private streets and alleyways that were part of an invisible order apparent only to the Parisian. Ironically, this was the very system that the new Paris had presumably purged. This paper is about the persistent, hidden and private spaces of Paris, which, I propose, is a *poché* space: at once interior, mysterious, and differential.

In the contemporary use of the term in architectural circles, *poché* is the technique of 'darkening in' or 'filling in' specific areas of an architectural drawing. This comes from the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* where the *poché* referred to the blackening-in of residual areas such as the structural or service elements of a plan. In a time and place where the structural system was load-bearing masonry, the *poché* allowed the plan to be read not only in terms of mass and void, but also through a foreknowledge of the proportionality between white areas and the areas of *poché* of the plan. A larger white area would indicate a higher ceiling. *Poché* was a way of differentiating the hollow areas from the solid, the covered rooms from the open courtyard, the houses from the streets, and so on

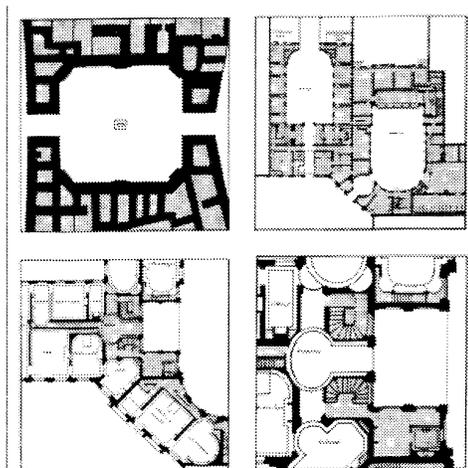


Fig.1 Poché as a drawing technique.

The fundamental sense of the word *poché*, according to the *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, is either something hollow (*chose creuse*) or something turgid (*chose enfléé*). The various senses of the word (a pocket, a small bag or sack, to poach an egg, to black an eye, to poke etc.) conjure up a sense of hollowness that may be perceived from any side; it is both a cavity and a protrusion. In a curious concomitance of seeming opposites, the word *poché* seems to emphasize the space that is created within the pocket or swelling and not the nature of the surface that creates the space. However, the perception of the space is, in both cases, from a position that is outside of that space. The space of *poché* embodies a scene that is completely 'interior'. Attempts to view this scene only help to intensify its interiority and externalize the viewer. Like the insides of a glove, this space cannot be objectified. Any effort to objectify the *poché* space only results in the apprehension of the limits of the probing device (in the case of the gloves, our hands). The *poché* is thus a space that is both interior and inexhaustible and one that sustains distinctions such as interior and exterior.

Poché in nineteenth century Paris is manifested in all these ways suggesting interiority, mystery, and differentiation. This paper focuses on the specific spaces of the apartment houses, the brothels, and the sewers, as *poché* and distinct from the grand, public, and 'planned' spaces of the city in the second half of the nineteenth century. These were private and mysterious pockets of space within a larger, more visible and homogenous urban space. The paper proposes that these spaces were 'interior' and resisted externalization. Attempts, such as Haussmann's grand planning and Émile Zola's socialist novels, to solve or dissolve the *poché* perceived it as contrary to their own schemes of order, hygiene, and morality. An analysis of the *poché* not only allow us to understand the thrust of these attempts, but also clarifies how it generates and sustains distinctions of interior and exterior, private and public, moral and immoral and so on.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, wrote, "For the private person, living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to the place of work. The former is constituted by the interior; the office is its complement... For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theater."¹ Benjamin's essay recalls the Paris of Louis-

Phillipe under whose reign the ruling classes, pursuing their business interests, make, for the first time, a distinction between the work place and the living place. The work place allowed people to look at their homes from outside, as a pocket of private space suspended within the fabric of the city. The distinction between work place and living space thereby heralded the *poché* in Paris: a space that was viewed from outside, and embodied distinctions of interior and exterior, and private and public. The urban archetype for the Parisian home was the multi-family apartment house, and therefore the impossibility of clearly classifying it as either private or public made this distinction even more clear. The identity and privacy of 'home' became a pertinent question in the context of the standardized apartment house, itself a product of industrialization.

The population of Paris nearly doubled between 1850 and 1870, so the apartment block as a building type was encouraged. Apartment houses existed in Paris long before the intervention of Haussmann, but within this scheme, they became much bigger. The new streets were much wider, and so allowed taller buildings on the frontages. Haussmann, concerned with the need for monumental terminations to his great new thoroughfares, directed new streets towards most of the existing monuments. This caused much of the new architecture of Paris to tend towards exaggerated volumes, and striking and regulated silhouettes. The greater height of the buildings tended to obscure the proportions of the façade and any effect of width had to be sustained by the neighboring buildings.² The façade wall was treated like a continuous and applied strip designed to be wrapped around the urban block. There is no indication of the inherent porosity of the block that is perceivable from a birds-eye-view. The regular arrangement in bays on the façades meant that there was no direct relation of the internal disposition of the rooms to the façade.

As a building that had to be inherently porous in order to accommodate the movements of the various tenants, guests and servants, the apartment house was, surprisingly, a notably opaque structure. The opacity could be attributed to the individual apartments and the hidden service spaces, which were like pockets of extremely private space suspended within this porous framework. The explosion of scale after Haussmann's restructuring of Paris caused the apartment house façades to become less transparent as the openings on the façades did not increase proportionately to the height and width of the frontages. Certain opacity could also be ascribed to the use of draperies and blinds, as the external façades of the apartment houses were sometimes too lavish for the insides. Moreover, where it was all right for the insides to be more lavish than the outside, the reverse was not acceptable. Sharon Marcus writes, "the strong desire and easy ability to see from one building to another that had so marked the July Monarchy literature began to retract into itself to the point of obfuscation. In an 1855 apartment house romance in which a man falls in love with a woman in the building opposite, Léo Lespès devoted the most space to elaborating obstacles to the hero's vision and to detailing the instruments and techniques that painstakingly allow him to incrementally increase his visual access to the woman's apartment."³ Architectural drawings from the period are also revealing in this regard. Typical elevations in a pattern book represent the openings on the façade

as dark opaque panes that cannot be visually transgressed. In section drawings, the back wall of a sectioned room is so rendered that it appears flush with the façade wall. The architectural impossibility of flattening the space of the room into an opaque patterned surface betrays a design to conceal the activity of the spaces beyond.

The plan organization of the apartment houses displays a similar characteristic of a *poché* space. The primary movement within the apartment house is linear

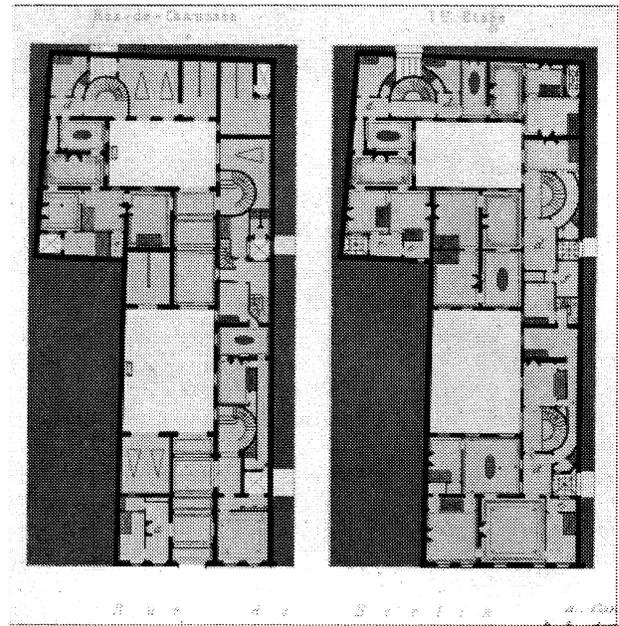


Fig.2 Plans of Apartment House. Paris. 1870.

The typical organization of the apartments' movement, the enfilade along a string of rooms, creates an experience of a series of mutually isolated scenes. There is no folding back upon a particular space as is the case with modern spaces, (one would recall Adolf Loos's Moller house and Beatriz Colomina's analysis of it). In the Parisian Apartment there is a sense of disorientation that comes along with not being able to understand the gestalt of the plan. The staircase, generally a point of reference, gets lost within the room-corridor-room schema that is characteristic of the rest of the house. Enclosed within its stairwell it becomes a vertical corridor.

The rooms of the apartment always display a bilateral symmetry that seems to be a direct influence of the rococo hôtels. It has usually been supposed that the symmetry of the rooms was a way of projecting a sense of perfection and recalling the ideals of classical architecture. However, it is also possible imagine the individual symmetries as a way of creating privacy and a self-enclosed universe: a universe that had its own center and its own independent order within a larger universe that was the house. The entrance to the private rooms is never axial, as if not to dilute the privacy and enclosure of the room. The view of the mirror above the mantelpiece, as the first sight when a visitor enters the rooms, is

always at an angle that reflects another door or window of the room. One is literally “shown the door” or reminded of the possible exit path as soon as one enters the room. The exteriority of the visitor is maintained as he finds himself outside of this pocket of private space.



Fig.3 Interior view of the apartment.

The mirror on the salon wall counters the gaze of the outside observer, as he approaches it axially, both exposing him in the act of looking and simultaneously embodying the interior world of the inhabitants.

Eugène Atget, a prominent French photographer and one of the first to record rooms without people in them, sold his album of Parisian Interiors to the Musée Carnavalet in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. By that time, the theme of the privacy of home was a well-worked theme for painters, who seldom painted interiors without people. Atget's photographs show interiors of apartment houses, and most of them witness the wall of the salon with the mirror and the fireplace. The absence of people from these photographs makes them similar to the architectural sections of the apartment houses, opaque and lifeless, but with one difference. Almost all of them have been taken by shifting slightly to the left or right of the axis in order for the camera to escape its own reflection in the

mirror. With that move, the room reveals itself as an interior and a private space seen through the eyes of the inhabitant.

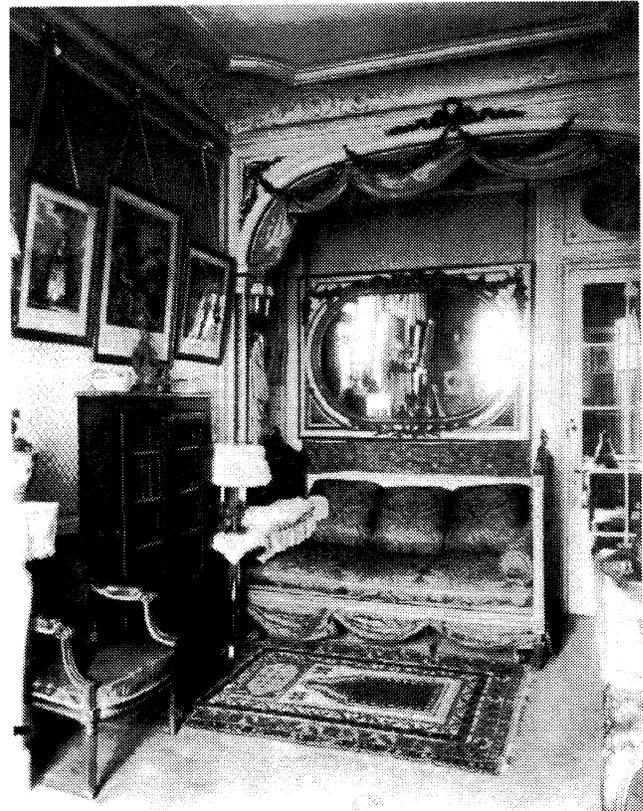


Fig.4 Photograph. Eugène Atget. 1910.

The mirrors in their multiple reflections open pockets of the various parts of the room to observer.

Walter Benjamin comments about Atget's work and observes that his photographs appear to be "...the scenes of a crime: for the scene of a crime is deserted...and the pictures that are taken of it have but one purpose, to reveal clues."⁴ The arrangement of objects around the room and the concealed meanings therein remind us of our own selves as both privy to an inhabitant's relationship with the room as well as an outsider to the setting.

The movement of servants within the house was totally independent of the main movement of tenants and visitors. In many cases if the main movement of the house followed a clockwise rotation, the servants' movement would be counter-clockwise. The *degagement* or the servants' areas of house, with its own staircase and movement passages, almost works like an independent house within the main house. The *degagement* in most cases was the leftover space after the figural rooms had been carved out of the plan. More accidental than designed, one can almost imagine it as a manipulation of the

poché of the walls of the apartment. Like the wall, the *degagement* was a structural element: structural to the society, to social rituals and to the everyday life of the tenants.

The more grand the city grew in scale, the more private its houses became. The apartment house became the site where personal privacy, secrecy, intrigue, and personal experience were turned into the highest aims of life. As pockets of private spaces within the city, the apartment houses were *poché* spaces, interior and mysterious to the outside observer. Moreover, like the architectural *poché* that differentiates several spatial dimensions (the hollow areas from the solid, the covered rooms from the open courtyard, the houses from the streets, the city from the surrounding landscape, and so on) the apartment house contained within itself various different levels of *poché* in the form of the apartments, the private rooms within the apartments, the servants spaces, the walls that contained smoke stacks and heating ducts, etc. With the Enlightenment ideals of the Second Empire, these spaces, in their varying degrees of visibility and enclosure, were also interpreted as unclean, immoral, and undesirable. This emerges clearly in Emile Zola's novels, particularly in *Pot Bouille*, which is set in an apartment house in the time of the Second Empire.

Zola's narration of the apartment building conjures up images of the juxtaposed lives of its bourgeois tenants and their servants: a society's messy mishmash of moral and physical corruption concealed behind the veneer of bourgeois respectability. Not only the subject of the narration, but also its structure reinforces the spatiality of the apartment house as a profound interiority, with rooms that enclose and 'fold in' an entire world of layers and relationships. Each chapter in *Pot Bouille* is built around isolated, self-enclosed scenes. The narrator further accentuates the apartment building's inward orientation by commenting repeatedly on its enclosed, internal features: stairways and landings, the closed door of each apartment, and the interior courtyard. Through his description of the apartment building, Zola examines the political, moral, and sexual landscape of nineteenth-century Paris.

The novel begins with the arrival of Octave Mouret, a young salesman from the provinces, who comes to Paris with the hope of making a fortune. The initial movement of Octave's introduction into the apartment house is a crucial one. The cab that brought him from the *Gare de Lyon* is held-up in traffic in the *Rue Neuve-Augustine*. The '*neuve*' in the street name suggests that it is a new street and a product of the new planning after 1852 and perhaps partially blocked due to the intense construction work that affected the city during this period. Although, ironically, it is on this street that Octave is dismayed to notice that Paris is not as clean as he thought. He is encouraged, however, by the brisk business on the streets and the shops.

Upon reaching the apartment house, Octave inspects the façade of the building: "Octave, who had got out and was now was standing on the pavement, measured it and studied it with a mechanical glance, from the silk shop on the ground floor to the recessed windows on the fourth floor, which opened on to the narrow terrace. On the first floor, carved female heads supported a cast-iron balcony of

intricate design. The surroundings of the windows, roughly chiseled in soft stone, were very elaborate; and lower down, over the ornamental doorway, were two Cupids holding a scroll bearing a number, which was lit at night by gas-jets from within."⁵

As is typical of Zola, he brings to light in one passage the various contradictions, conflicts, and accommodations set into play in the apartment house: the commercial space of the silk shop and the private residences, the hand-crafted female heads and the industrially manufactured cast-iron balcony, the rough chiseled stone and the elaborately finished doorway, the old design of the cupids lit by new gas jets, etc. The façade of the house is the only presentation of the house to the street, its only manifestation. Octave's "mechanical glance" divulges a lack of interest in the façade. The new urban order had rendered the city uniform to the extent that it became difficult to differentiate one building from another. The only marks of difference were the carved embellishments and the number. The identity of the house had been reduced to a number and a sign. The commonness of the apartment house's outward appearance in the novel invites a reading of it, and the plot concealed within it, as typical of any apartment house in Paris.

Octave is shown into the building by its architect, Campardon, who explains in great detail the splendid appearance and amenities of the building. The tenants that Campardon repeatedly points out as respectable and honorable seem only to complement the wholesome structure of society that the apartment building seems to embody. Octave is initially overawed by the new building and its extravagant decoration, its gilt carvings, its red carpet and heated main staircase, and the grand main entrance with its imitation marble paneling and cast iron banisters that "was in imitation of old silver."⁶ Octave, however, soon learns that the building is far from being structurally sound: it is poorly constructed, there are large cracks, and the paint has begun to peel. These discoveries are analogous to his acquaintance with his neighbors who themselves are far from ideals of honor and morality.

Zola further explores the house as a symbol of society in the social relations between the two types of occupants of the building: the bourgeois tenants and the working-class servants. The separation between the two is initially described as a set of clear distinctions in manners, etiquette, morality, education, language, hygiene, and wealth. The corresponding physical areas of the house that are inhabited by the two kinds of occupants are distinguished through a narrative of differentiation. Thus the main staircase is red-carpeted, heated, grand, and brightly lit, while the servant's stair is dark, narrow, dirty, and freezing cold. The main courtyard is clean (almost sterile), paved, and has a fountain, as against the service courtyard which acts as a literal and figurative rubbish dump for the building and is compared more than once to a sewer. Octave is shown the kitchen and finds the servants exchanging raucous gossip from window to window and to the courtyard below. "It was as if a sewer had brimmed over."⁷ The courtyards between kitchens are compared to the basement (the underground). "She opened the window, and from the narrow courtyard separating the kitchens an icy dampness rose, a stale odor like that of a musty cellar."⁸ The servant rooms bear a similar difference to the tenant rooms. The

bourgeoisie, it seems, go to extreme lengths to maintain the difference. In fact, this segregation is created in day-to-day speech where associations are made that instantly relegate the spaces of servants and the servants themselves, to an inferior status as dirty, immoral, promiscuous, and stupid.

Zola's *Pot Bouille* reinforces the notion of the apartment house as a *poché* space. Apart from its complete interiority and impenetrability, it is also differential: the *poché* allows the emergence of two contrasting spaces, in this case the respectable, moral and hygienic apartments of the bourgeoisie and the promiscuous, immoral, and filthy servant areas. If the *poché* can also be understood in terms of the beaux-arts sense of the term, the filling-in or blackening of the solids in order for the voids to be read more clearly, then what remains hidden allows what is visible to be seen more clearly. Thus, the servant spaces, as *poché*, allow the apartments to appear as structures of morality, respectability and hygiene; and the apartment house, in turn, as a structure of privacy and opacity, allows the city to be read more clearly as public and transparent.

The city, in this sense, seems to have grown more transparent and public by making its buildings more private and opaque to the street. In a losing battle to aggrandizement by powerful planning intentions, the social qualities of the urban space of the previous era remained in only a few pockets of the city. Haussmann had specifically attacked spaces of privacy in the city and exterminated them under the banner of science, hygiene, and morality. Until the Second Empire, the sewers of Paris were a site of seditious activities performed away from the public eye. Their filth harbored not only diseases like cholera but also criminals and revolutionaries. With the construction of a large, easily accessible sewer system under the pretext of ridding the city of epidemics, these impediments were also flushed out. As Donald Reid tells us, "after Haussmann, the sewers no longer figured as a place which nurtured political radicals with characteristics associated with mire."⁹ The problem of disposal involved not only notorious bodies but also dead bodies as the cemeteries of Paris overflowed during the epidemics. The notion that cemeteries inside the city were not salubrious had been entertained long before in 1786 with the removal of the human remains chaotically buried in the cemetery of the Innocents church to the better-organized catacombs. During the Second Empire Haussmann not only completed the systematic removal of remains from the more overburdened cemeteries to the catacombs, he also sponsored a scheme for an underground network of suburban cemeteries linked by train to a main terminal at the Montparnasse cemetery.

With similar "sanitary" aims, the Morals Brigade, an agency of the Prefecture of Police, was commissioned to rationalize the control of prostitution. It established municipal guidelines, registration systems, and venereal examinations, under the general heading of the *police des mœurs*, so that the prostitute could remain within the society and under its control.¹⁰ There was a special tax imposed on registered prostitutes. The control of prostitution was in fact a control of women, and all women were vulnerable to being accused

of prostitution in the city policed by the Morals Brigade. In her book *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris*, Jill Harsin says, "Instead of the orderly procedures envisioned by the creators of the system, the *police des mœurs* gave rise to a system of repression directed not only against prostitutes but against women of the working classes in general."¹¹

Sanitation carried the promise of a controlled homogeneity for the State. The threat of the alien difference of dirt (matter out-of-place) and by extension 'dirty' people (people out-of-place) had to be, in other words, mastered. Notions of cleanliness were not only practical but also moral: control was extended across a spectrum from excrement to revolutionaries and prostitutes.

For Haussmann and Napoleon III, the image of progress was built upon the elimination of all that could not be observed, decoded, or homogenized. In attacking the *poché* as disorderly, unhygienic and immoral, the State promoted notions of progress as scientific, hygienic and moral. Zola's novels of the *Rougon Macquart* series, particularly *Pot Bouille* have been regarded as an attack on Haussmannization. Zola plays on those very characteristics that seem to constitute 'progress' for the modern city and society. Critics have claimed that Zola's writings demystify the image of the modern and progressive city by exposing the literal and moral filth that lay behind the new structures of the city and their deceptively imposing facades. Zola's primary theme in *Pot Bouille* is no doubt the opposition of contrasts that he brings into play throughout the novel: he not only acknowledges the difficulty of identifying these oppositions as clear and distinct but also demonstrates the inversion of signs of the contrasted pair. The novel earnestly sets up the oppositions of interior and exterior, clean and dirty, moral and immoral and then effectively dismantles them.

Zola's personal disposition towards a moralizing agenda in the *Rougon-Macquart* has been discussed at length by critics. His socialistic predilections drove him to examine the tyranny and falsehood of the Bourgeoisie and the struggle of the proletariat. Where Haussmann tried to master the *poché* by containing it within buildings or altogether eliminating it, Zola appears to do so by showing that there was no real difference between the hidden and the visible. For Zola, the *poché* was ubiquitous and thus absent as a pocket of space, impenetrable and differential. The sense of the *poché* as difference is absent, but its absence reinforces the sense of the 'other', the hidden and mysterious, that is constituted by it. The *poché* eludes both Haussmann and Zola, and yet we recognize the thrusts of their attempts only through their attacks on it.

A study of the *poché* resembles Michel Foucault's discourse on *heterotopia* and 'other' spaces. However, its scope is not limited to the marginal and the formal and psychological 'other'. Here the 'other' refers not only to what is outside everyday life but also what is contained, or potentially contained, within it. A study of the *poché* allows us to investigate our tendencies, paradigms, and notions of progress and the exclusions that determine them.

NOTES

- ¹Walter Benjamin, *Paris. Capital of the Nineteenth Century*. (1935) in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p.154)
- ²See Anthony Sutcliffe, *Paris: an Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)
- ³Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999, p.146)
- ⁴See Marie-France Boyer, "Framed Evidence". *The World of Interiors. September 1990* (London: Pharos Publications Ltd., 1990)
- ⁵Émile Zola, *Pot Luck (Pot Bouille)*, tr. Brian Nelson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 3).
- ⁶Ibid., p. 5
- ⁷Ibid., p. 9
- ⁸Ibid., p. 25
- ⁹Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, p.51)
- ¹⁰See Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- ¹¹Ibid., p.xvi

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16. Zola, Émile, *L'Assomoir*. tr. Atwood H. Townsend. New York: New American Library, 1962 (1877).
17. Zola, Émile, *Pot Luck (Pot Bouille)*. tr. Brian Nelson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1881).

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