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THE ADVANTAGE OF THE MARGIN

The Avant-Garde Role of Finland-Swedish Modernism

Modernism in Swedish literature was not initiated in Sweden but across the Baltic sea, by a small group of writers belonging to Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. This rather striking example of the dynamic interrelation between centre and periphery in literary evolution is today a generally accepted fact. Actually, the revolution in poetic language which Finland-Swedish writers like Edith Södergran, Elmer Diktonius, and Gunnar Björling introduced in the 1910's and early 1920's had to wait one or two decades before it established itself in "mainland Sweden".

The young Finland-Swedes must in retrospect be counted among the most significant modernist poets of the European post-World War I generation. However, international critics and literary scholars have come to realize this only rather recently. For language reasons, the international recognition of the Finland-Swedish avant-garde has been belated; in the case of Gunnar Björling, it still lies in the future. In his survey of international modernism, the brilliant Danish critic and poet Poul Borum devoted three entire pages (of around totally two hundred) to Björling's "universalist dada-individualism". The conclusion was: "Together with Mallarmé and Gertrude Stein, Björling probably stands out as the real linguistic innovator of modernism". The judgement might surprise but should rather be supplemented - e. g., with the Russian Velimir Chlebnikov - than dismissed.¹

¹Quotation from the Swedish edition, *Poetisk modernism*, translated by Hans Björkegren, Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand 1968, p. 89. In his afterword to a collection of Björling's poetry in 1989, Borum actually rephrased his judgement thus: "Björling is one of the great innovator of modern poetry, comparable only to the Russian Chlebnikov and the American Gertrude Stein", in: Gunnar Björling, *Valda dikter i två band*, band 2, Bra Böcker: Höganäs 1989, p. 191.

For obvious reasons, it is impossible here to give more than a few hints of the originality of the Finland-Swedish modernists.² My article also has a second aim, besides the purely informational. The case of the Finland-Swedish "revolution from the margin" of the early 1920's, often discussed by Swedish literary historians, rises questions on the dynamics of literary space and on literary change in general.

With her first book, *Dikter* ("Poems", 1916), Edith Södergran, to the dismay of the small and conservative reading public in Finland, opened up doors to totally new poetic worlds. Her free, euphorically expressionistic verse was conscious and self-conscious:

beauty is not the thin sauce in which poets serve themselves,
beauty is to wage war and seek happiness,
beauty is to serve superior powers.³

In her biography an apparently marginalized person, Södergran the poet, in a few collections of poems 1916-1923, sited her poetic I as the center of a universe of new images. Writing her first poems in German, she actually never learnt the rules of Swedish poetic tradition, and hardly cared for them either. Her poetry obviously did have roots, but they were not Finland-Swedish or mainland Swedish. Taking Russian symbolists, Nietzsche, Walt Whitman and Else Lasker-Schüler as points of departure, Södergran's work "sums up a long modernist development that had passed by the Swedish-language community almost completely unnoticed".⁴

Biographic reductionism has often prevented critics from seeing Södergran's poetic radicalism as an aesthetic project. Actually, it was a daring creative act, throwing a bridge between the Scandinavian margin and European post-symbolism, allied with the international 'New Woman' discourse of the time.⁵

²For more factual information about the writers, see Per Stam's contribution to this volume. The Finland-based English language web-site *Pegasos* has quite good information on the Finland-Swedish modernist writers: <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/indeksi.htm>. The bilingual anthology *Auf der Karte Europas ein Fleck: Gedichte der osteuropäischen Avantgarde*, hrsg. von Manfred Peter Hein, Zürich: Ammann 1991 situates the Finland-Swedish avant-garde in an interesting Central and East European context, from Finland through the Baltics and Poland down to Macedonia.

³ "Skönhet" ("Beauty"), in Södergran's first collection, *Dikter* (1916).

⁴ Bengt Holmqvist, *Modern finlandssvensk litteratur*, Stockholm: Natur och kultur 1951, p. 20-21.

⁵On biographism in Södergran scholarship, which has stressed the poet's position of triple isolation (consumptive, living on the family's dacha in Karelia, finally impoverished by the Russian revolution), see Jytte Kronig's instructive "Introduction", in *Edith Södergran: a Changing Image: Looking for a New Perspective on the Work of a Finnish Avant-Garde Poet*, ed. by Petra Broomans, Adriaan van der Hoeven, Jytte Kronig, Groningen : Rijksuniversiteit 1993, p. 6-10. For new approaches to Södergran's conscious choice of strategy, cf. Birgitta Trotzig's seminal essay "Edith Södergran" in: *Författarnas litteraturhistoria*, red. Lars Ardelius & Gunnar Rydström, 2, Stockholm: Författarförlaget 1978, p. 374-401; Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Ediths jag. Edith Södergran och modernismens födelse*, Stockholm: Norstedts 1998; and Ulla Evers on Södergran and the literary field (in Bourdieu's terms), "Det är makten,

On foot
I had to walk through the solar systems,
before I found the first thread of my red dress.
Already, I sense myself.
Somewhere in space hangs my heart,
sparks fly from it, shaking the air,
to other reckless hearts.⁶

The common goal of the Finland-Swedish modernists who followed Södergran's appearance on the literary scene was nothing less than a revolution in poetic language. It is interesting to note in which social context this revolution took place. Already in 1906, through a parliamentary reform, the Swedish-speaking minority's earlier dominating position in Finland came to an end. In the constitution of independent Finland, in 1919, bilingualism with equal rights for Finnish and Swedish was codified. Obviously this was a concession to the Finland-Swedish minority (then 12 % of the population) as a reward for its almost total allegiance to the victorious white side in the traumatic civil war of 1918. This did not mean, however, that bilingualism was practiced by most citizens. Instead, the language question remained the topic of fierce political controversies between the Swedish-speaking minority and the Finnish majority (to which the greater part of the defeated red side of the civil war, but also the new bourgeoisie, belonged) during the inter-war period. In this situation, the Finland-Swedish modernists exposed themselves as exceptions to the rule. For all of them, practical bilingualism or polyglottism was a basic experience, even if their mother-tongue was Swedish. Edith Södergran had German, Russian, and Swedish from her childhood in St. Petersburg, and was actively writing in German parallel even since she had become a well-known Finland-Swedish writer. Her friend and correspondent, the critic and prose writer Hagar Olsson, and the poet Elmer Diktonius wrote both in Swedish and in Finnish. Henry Parland was born in Viborg in a family with Russian and German and only learnt Finnish and Swedish at school in Helsinki. As one critic states, "Strictly speaking, modernism was not very Finland-Swedish and strikingly un-Swedish".⁷

Elmer Diktonius was the first poet to respond to Edith Södergran's novelty, to her universal horizons and high intonation. Diktonius was a true internationalist

som darrar i min sko, det är makten, som rör sig i min klännings veck", in: *I klännings veck. Feministiska diktanalyser*, utg. av Eva Lilja, Göteborg: Anamma 1998, p. 85-143.

⁶"On Foot I Had to Walk Through the Solar Systems" (1919), translated by Stina Katchadourian.

⁷Clas Zilliacus in: *Den Svenska Litteraturen*, del V, red. Lars Lönnroth och Sven Delblanc, Stockholm: Bonniers 1989, p. 161. Zilliacus mentions that Södergran "all her life spoke Swedish stiffly with a clear accent", that for Olsson and Diktonius Finnish was as good as Swedish (sometimes, for polemical purposes, even better), and that Björling had to correct Parland's manuscripts. Cf. Gisbert Jänicke's study on Södergran and German language: *Edith Södergran: diktare på två språk*, Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 1984.

modernist with contacts abroad; a composer who corresponded with Schönberg and gave lessons to and befriended Otto Wille Kuusinen, the young marxist critic; a translator who introduced Edgard Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Pound and the German pre-expressionist Mombert.⁸ If revolution had been victorious in Finland, Diktonius might have been an analogue to Majakovskij. His attitude to communism was initially sympathetic, but he saw the aesthetic revolution as primary: "I am a communist because Communism inclines in my direction". As early as in 1922, Diktonius' poem "The Jaguar" was included in Ivan Goll's global avant-garde anthology, published in Paris.⁹ The introduction to this striking combination of Nietzscheanism, futurist verbal montage, and revolutionarism became the poet's signature:

From green leaves sticks forth
red muggle
eyes with triangular glances
speckledly –
whiskers waving
clawpaw –
you fly indeed! – my heart's jaguar! –
then fly and bite and tear and slash to pieces!
Your-my morality: to strike.

To bite's a compulsion as long as bite gives life
to tear is sacred as long as rotten stinks
and life's ugliness must be slashed to pieces
'til beauty-wholeness from its earth can grow.

We two are thus, my poem and I: one claw
one will are we two, one maw one tooth
are we together: one machine that strikes.
We will slay the cry of the feelingless
the sympathy of the hartless
the religiosity of those false-in-faith
the impotence of what is strong
the evil weakness of what's good;
we'll give birth to slaying
we will make space
some day we will see
sunspots dance.¹⁰

In 1922 – the year of such events in European poetry as the publication of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pasternak's *Sestra moja - žizn'* – Finland-Swedish modernism

⁸Kuusinen was, after his escape to Soviet Russia in 1918, to become a gray eminence in Kremlin up to Khrushchev's time. Diktonius' book of translations was *Ungt hav* ('Young Ocean'), Schildts: Helsingfors 1923.

⁹*Les cinq continents: anthologie mondiale de poésie contemporaine* par Ivan Goll, Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1922.

¹⁰Translation by George C. Schoolfield.

appeared on the literary scene as a group with Hagar Olsson as the leading critic and Edith Södergran as a figurehead. Diktonius met Södergran and Hagar Olsson, and the avant-garde journal *Ultra*, with texts in both Swedish and Finnish, was started under the slogan, "Open up the windows to Europe!" The journal's publisher also put out Diktonius' first volume of poetry and the first book by Gunnar Björling.¹¹ Edith Södergran translated Hagar Olsson into German and worked intensely during her last years on a volume of translations of Finland-Swedish poetry, including her own.¹²

Gunnar Björling made his delayed debut in 1922 with a collection of poetry coloured by a vitalist philosophy of his own. From the point of view of poetic language, this philosophy corresponded to a more and more far-going disruption of syntax and dehierarcization of speech, which makes his poetry extremely difficult to translate. In Björling's mature poetry, full-semantic words are reduced, syntax becomes ambiguous, conjunctions and particles ('and', 'that', 'as') foregrounded, and metaphors dismissed. The idiolect which is the result is immediately recognizable even in book-titles like *Words and That Not Else, Air Is and Light, That in One's Eye*. Björling's "linguistic turn", which only has had its decisive impact on Swedish poetry in the 1980's, disarms the logic of propositional language and its power to control reality. While the means are quite different, the goal of Björling's puzzling poetry of "not-saying" is in a way similar to that of the early Boris Pasternak: to make reality speak in spite of the restrictions of language.¹³

Henry Parland, who died at 22, was strongly influenced by Björling but himself also inspired the older friend and colleague. Parland had an extraordinary sense for surface, detail, and "modernity". A typical poem is entitled "Gasoline":

I am a great God
and my price is \$1.40 per gallon
and men murder one another for my sake.

Whee!
when fire has kissed me
and iron trembles: life!
Then
I know
why I have dreamt so long

¹¹ Elmer Diktonius, *Hårda sånger*, Helsingfors: Daimon 1922; Gunnar Björling, *Vilande dag*, Helsingfors: Daimon 1922. – Diktonius' first book, a collection of aphorisms preceded by the introduction to "The Jaguar", quoted above, was actually published late in 1921 in Stockholm through Diktonius' political contacts but had no response whatsoever in Sweden: *Min dikt*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget Lyrik 1921.

¹² Gisbert Jänicke, *op. cit.*, p. 67-84.

¹³ Cf. Horace Engdahl's conclusion, "It is at hand to interpret Björling's grammar as a unique peace-treaty between the I and being", quoted in: *Den Svenska Litteraturen*, V, p. 168.

under the earth.¹⁴

Parland, in theory and practice, connected the group with international criticism, *die neue Sachlichkeit* and Russian formalism (one of his essays was entitled "The Uproar of Things", an obvious reference to Majakovskij).

Needless to say, the more closely one looks at the Finland-Swedish modernists, the more obvious individual differences become. But the totality of their poetic innovation and their confrontation with traditionalism make them typical exponents of the international avant-garde.¹⁵ Nothing like this happened in poetic language in Sweden, not to speak of the rest of Scandinavia, until the debut of Gunnar Ekelöf in 1932. When the young Pär Lagerkvist appeared as an expressionist poet in 1916, his *Angst* and violent imagery actually were more religious than Nietzschean or urbanistic, and had few problems in fitting into a rather regular post-symbolist verse. Sweden had to wait until the early 1940's for the archetypical confrontation between modernists and traditional poetry and traditionalist critics (involving polemics, parodies, and public debates).

From an "outside" European perspective, it was obviously the Finland-Swedish poets who were on time, and mainland Swedish literature which was still isolated and provincial. For Swedish literary historians, however, the neighbour has been the exception and Swedish literature the "normal". A standard explanation to the appearance of avant-garde poetry in Finland long before it came to Sweden would sound more or less as follows. The reasons for modernism to appear exactly there, in the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, and exactly then, in the years following World War I and the civil war, are several. One "reason" is the simply coincidental arrival, in a certain place, of a series of strong talents with an oppositional attitude, together with a flamboyant propagandistic critic with a wide response (Hagar Olsson). A second reason is the closedness of the Finland-Swedish linguistic milieu, which was easy to overview and made contacts and networking easy. A third reason given is the geographical closeness to the avant-garde movement in neighbouring Russia.¹⁶ A recent study contends that it was the newly gained independence from Russia which

¹⁴Translated by Peter Malekin.

¹⁵The publication of "The Jaguar" in France was not an isolated case. On Diktonius' contribution to the multilingual avant-garde journal *Zenit*, edited in Zagreb, see Clas Zilliacus, "The Roaring Twenties of Elmer Diktonius", in: *Gudsöga, djävulstagg. Diktoniusstudier*, utg. av Agneta Rahikainen, Marit Lindqvist och Maria Antas, Helsingfors: Svenska litteratursällskapet 2000, p. 9-27.

¹⁶The arguments are paraphrased after a well-known handbook, Erik Hj. Linder's *Fyra decennier av 1900-talet* (= *Ny illustrerad svensk litteraturhistoria*, huvudredaktör: E.N. Tigerstedt, del 5), 2nd ed., Stockholm: Natur och kultur 1952, p. 420.

created a "future-oriented spirit of activity", exploding in modernism. Why such a spirit should be felt only by Swedish-speaking authors is given a somewhat strained explanation: the Finnish-language majority was totally occupied by building its new national culture.¹⁷ In all such narratives, the Finland-Swedes' minority status, their position on the margin, is underlined. What is not made explicit, however, is the dynamic interrelation between minority and surrounding majority (majorities), between margin and center(s).

In order to reformulate the question about the Finland-Swedish avant-garde's "early" appearance, one may use Jurij Lotman's concept of the semiosphere. One of the basic tenets of Lotman's semiotics of culture is the productive role of linguistic asymmetry and translation. We are all familiar with the sayings that translation is theoretically impossible, but nevertheless works in practice; and that a translation's relation to the original always is one of deficiency. According to Lotman, however, translation between asymmetric languages should not be defined as *loss*, but as *creation* of new information:

For the results are not precise translations, but approximate equivalences determined by the cultural-psychological and semiotic context common to both systems. This kind of "illegitimate", imprecise but *approximate translation is one of the most important features of any creative thinking*. For these "illegitimate" associations provoke new semantic connections and give rise to texts that are in principle new ones.¹⁸

Any culture thus evolves thanks to the continuous conquest, translation, and integration of the Other into the language of Culture. A certain overlapping between the two structures is necessary, otherwise no understanding is possible. But if the two sides were perfectly overlapping— if for example, if one culture were to completely assimilate another, or a text were to perfectly fulfil a reader's expectations, or a translation of a Björling poem into English could be re-translated into Swedish with no changes resulting — the result would be no new information. The greater the non-overlapping is, the more active the translation is and the more new information is created.

The semiosphere, according to Lotman, is the universe of cultural and semiotic languages which range from complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability. This semiosphere, and any cultural space within it, can be described in terms of center, periphery and boundary. If the center is the normal and normative, the

¹⁷Torsten Pettersson, *Gåtans namn. Tankens och känslans mönster hos nio finlandssvenska modernister*, Helsinki & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet / Atlantis 2001, p. 12-13.

¹⁸Lotman, Yuri, *Universe of the Mind: a Semiotic Theory of Culture*, translated by Ann Shukman, London & New York: I. B. Tauris 1990, p. 37 (my italics, L.K.)

periphery is the coloured and marked, opposing or challenging the center.¹⁹ The hot-spots for semioticizing processes is the boundary, which both separates "us" from "the others" but at the same time creates a unity.

It is always the boundary of something and so belongs to both frontier cultures, to both contiguous semiospheres. The boundary is bilingual and polylingual. The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language, it is the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal', it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics while still retaining their characteristics.²⁰

If we look at some essential features of Finland-Swedish modernism in the light of Lotman's concept of semiosphere and creative cultural translation, we can note the following. Finland-Swedish literature was, and still is, not only minoritarian, but actually doubly minoritarian or doubly peripheral. The relation to Finnish-language literature in the home country is superimposed on the relation to mainland Swedish literature. Neither of these literatures was, however, actually involved in the struggle the modernists of the 1920's were waging. As targets for their criticism, Hagar Olsson or Diktonius had to find writers inside their own semiotic space, Finland-Swedish writers of "the old generation" (Arvid Mörne, Bertel Gripenberg, and followers), for whom modernism represented a challenge from their periphery. On the other side of the closest boundary there were almost no allies to be found. Strindberg and Gustaf Fröding, both dead, and the solitary Vilhelm Ekelund were the only Swedish exceptions to the rule; among Finns there were no allies at all. In this situation, the modernists reached for the further away foreign as sources for translation of the new – i.e., for Europe and America. It was in the international foreign, in the avant-garde of Metropolis, sometime in cosmic universe, that the young modernists found the modern alternative expression and world-view to be translated into their own semiosphere. Bringing foreign elements home, they constructed such typically polemical oppositions in relation to the center as 'female/androgyn/beast' vs. 'gentleman', 'the subconscious' vs. 'the intellectual', 'violent' vs. 'lyrical', 'spoken language' vs. 'written, "correct" language',

¹⁹Formalist critics like Viktor ŕklovskij and Jurij Tynjanov, themselves close to the Russian avant-garde, used the terms periphery and center when pointing out that literary evolution is not simply a peaceful "succession" of generations but a dynamic and often bitter struggle between the new and the old. The formalists' object was, however, the monolithic, imperial landscape of Russian literature and the struggle between genres inside it. Their use of the terms 'periphery' and 'center' only concerns hierarchy, not cultural space. Cf. Tynjanov's essay "Literaturnyj fakt" (1925), reprinted in Jurij Tynjanov, *Poŕika - Istorija literatury - Kino*, Moskva: Nauka 1977, p. 255-270.

²⁰Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 136-137

and 'dirty/mixed/hybrid' vs. 'purely Swedish'. At the same time, being foreign at home opened (potential, one must add) channels to the outside.²¹

In this perspective of the semiospheric dynamics, the discussions about genetic influences – did Södergran *actually* read Achmatova or Zinaida Hippus, and then what; did she know of Emily Dickinson; or had Elmer Diktonius read Majakovskij, and then when? - lose some of their importance. Or, in terms of translation theory, the source texts become less interesting than the target text and its relation to the target culture. The contribution of Finland-Swedish modernism can thus to a large extent be described in terms of heteroglossia and hybridization as means for widening the cultural and linguistic horizons.

The boundary is the switchpoint for translation, through which foreign texts become part of the semiosphere while retaining some of their foreignness. Diktonius translated very early into Swedish, and Edith Södergran into German. But the Finland-Swedish modernists' bilingual or multilingual background was not only mobilized for translation proper. What they wrote as original texts also had a "foreignizing" character. Inevitably, they were attacked for "cosmopolitanism" or "bolshevism" and for having allies and sources of inspiration which were not canonical: German, Russian or American poetry; Finnish language; at least not normative Helsinki Finland-Swedish. But, as Marina Tsvetaeva says, "All poetry is translation in the first place".²² What the avant-garde performed, starting from the margin of the Finland-Swedish semiosphere, was a special kind of cultural translation. Witt-Brattström quotes Gunnar Ekelöf's opinion about Södergran's "deficient" Swedish, and comments: "This 'deficiency' can equally be said to have been an advantage if one wanted to write in high style. Swedish as 'book-language' simply made it possible for Edith Södergran to take a short-cut into modernism".²³ Swedish literature was thus taught to speak modernism, and the primer brought Edith Södergran's German-coloured syntax and Diktonius' compact Fennicist genitives, but also Björling's efforts to create a new, intuitive language. In retrospect, it is possible to say, with a paradox, that "much of the most durable in Finland-Swedish modernism was not written in Swedish, but it has, with time, more and more become so".²⁴

²¹From the point of view of modernist messianism, the central task was not to save Finland-Swedish culture from its outsider-position, on the contrary, this was the clue. Outsidership should be used as a spring-board out into the world, therefore the striking internationalism not only in *Ultra* but also in Södergran's ideas of a supermen's international of poets", Witt-Brattström, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

²² Marina Tsvetaeva's letter to Rilke, 6 July 1926, in: Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Zwetajewa, Boris Pasternak: *Briefwechsel*, hrsg. von Jewgenij Pasternak..., Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1983, p. 206: "Dichten is schon übertragen, aus der Muttersprache - in eine andere, ob französisch oder deutsch wird wohl gleich sein. Keine Sprache ist Muttersprache. Dichten ist nachdichten."

²³Witt-Brattström, Ebba, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Tsvetaeva's words (above, footnote 21) also strongly relativize Ekelöf's formulation about how Södergran's phrasing "betrays the lack of contact with the mothertongue and its organic development".

²⁴ Clas Zilliacus, in: *Den Svenska Litteraturen*, V, p. 161.

The recently published second part of the great two-volume *Finlands svenska litteraturhistoria* ('The History of Finland's Swedish Literature') offers an interesting description of the specificity of this literature, based on the Finland-Swedish minority's uneasy relation to the problem of Finland's modernization process. To the earlier mentioned semiotic divisions (center – periphery - boundary) one can add other. The minority was obviously alienated from the new wave of Finnish nationalist construction. Clas Zilliacus describes the situation of the Swedish-language writer in the new Finland, striving for independence and cultural self-determination, as one of "mimetic deficit". The main options of response to the situation were historical nostalgia, provincialism, or radical modernism. Hagar Olsson's answer, in the name of the avant-garde, was unambiguous:

If we look into the future, it is neither the flesh-pots of Sweden nor the protected domestic skerries which beckon to us – but the free international arena. By this I do not mean that we should write like they do in Paris or New York - but that we should write as if we had a Paris or a New York to conquer on Finland's soil. The more nationalistically limited our word is, the less chances does it have to gain a hearing, quite simply because in that case it does not correspond to our true essence, it does not have its source in our actual situation – on the island in the ocean. Only the oceanic winds are able to give our words wings. As nationalists we, citizens of Finland, have little or nothing to win, as internationalist – everything. As such we have a mission to fulfil here up in the North. It might prove that our last winged word was not said with Runeberg or Topelius. A poetic work like that of Edith Södergran is symptomatic. It is international in its essence, born in a process of radical change. This is what all our *Kulturkamp* is about – a daring Robinsonade. In that spirit we shall prevail!²⁵

The dynamic contribution made by Finland-Swedish modernist and avant-garde poets Edith Södergran, Gunnar Björling and Elmer Diktonius, and others was a revolt from the cultural periphery, seeking its allies in internationalism. Thus, the radicals from the periphery pointed out the direction for later changes in the still, at the time, peacefully self-sufficient and provincial mainland Swedish culture.

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²⁵ Hagar Olsson, "Finländsk robinsonad", *Quosego* 1928: 3, p. 130 (?).

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