

Meyerhold and Chekhov - A Study of *33 Swoons* -

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On 25 March 1935 the Meyerhold Theatre staged *33 Swoons* to mark the 75th anniversary of Anton Chekhov's birth. This production consisted of 3 one-act farces: *The Anniversary*, *The Bear* and *The Proposal*.¹ The director Vsevolod Meyerhold had noted the number of swoons that Chekhov had written in these farces. The total number was 33 and became the title of the triple bill.

Meyerhold had met Chekhov in 1898 when the Moscow Art Theatre had been founded. He played the part of Treplev in the historic production of *The Seagull*. In 1901 he played Tuzenbach in the first production of *Three Sisters*. According to Meyerhold, Chekhov's ideas about theatre differed from those of the Moscow Art Theatre. Meyerhold was deeply impressed when Chekhov spoke during one of the rehearsals. He made notes of the playwright's word.

The stage demands a degree of artifice. You have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous onto it.²

In March 1902 Meyerhold and some of younger actors of the Moscow Art Theatre left the company to form their own theatre. For 3 years this new group worked in the Ukraine and Georgia. Despite favouring symbolist theatre, the company was required to perform standard repertory for the provincial audiences. During this period Meyerhold began his career as a director. His numerous productions included Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Seagull*, *Ivanov*, *The Wedding*, and *The Proposal*. On 4 February 1904 his company performed *The Cherry Orchard* less than 3 weeks after its premiere at the Moscow Art Theatre. This production was the last Chekhov's play that Meyerhold directed until 1935.

Rehearsals for *33 swoons* began in November 1934. Meyerhold was also engaged as a director for Tchaikovsky's opera of *The Queen of Spades* at the Leningrad Maly Opera. He was also overseeing the planning and construction of the new Meyerhold Theatre.

Meyerhold's production of *33 Swoons* was considered a failure because the humour was ruined by his precise direction. Considering Meyerhold's success with Russian classic comedies *The Forest* and *The Government Inspector*, the failure of *33 Swoons* did, however, bore the hallmarks of his unique style of direction. His attempts to stylize Chekhov helped to defines Chekhov's dramaturgy. An interview with Meyerhold appeared in the newspaper Pravda on 25 March 1935.

Chekhov of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters* is no longer close to us today. Another Chekhov is an inimitable portraitist who paints paltry people and represents their tiny passion, everyday trivialities and their philistinism. He is our strong comrade fighting against relics of disgusting vulgarities in the variety of his works.³

Chekhov's farces were a throw-back to his humorous early short stories written under the pseudonym Antosha Chekhonte. Yet at the end of the 19 century some of the censors were very negative about these farces. They were described as "totally unnatural people, unnatural situation" (*The Anniversary*)⁴, and "unfavourable impression made by a very strange story" (*The Bear*).⁵

Meyerhold directed these farces as satire. His idea was to illuminate the vulgarity of Russian society. In *The Proposal* the characters display intolerance, self-interest and possessive desire. In *The Bear* a hypocritical widow and a fashionable misogynist fall in love. In *The Anniversary* the bank is seen as a fraudulent organization profiting by exploitation and stratagem. In the production of *33 Swoons* the swoon is seen not only as a trick, but also a manifestation of neurasthenia amongst the intelligentsia of late 19th century in Russia. This approach by Meyerhold reminds us of his landmark production of *The Government Inspector* which lampooned the bureaucracy of 1830~40s' Petersburg behind Gogol's provincial story. According to Meyerhold Gogol and Chekhov used a similar technique when creating characters.

But, Meyerhold paid a little attention to their differences. Gogol satirized society's vulgarities and imperfections. Chekhov presented the absurd nature of the individual. Seiro Sato uses the theme of proposal to compare the two writers. He sees Gogol's *The Wedding* as a "farce of situation" and Chekhov's *The Bear* and *The Proposal* as "character farces".⁶

Gogol's satirical tendency was unacceptable during the period of Socialist Realism promulgated at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Maxim Gorky, who was the chairman of the Congress, made the distinction between Gogol's "Critical Realism" from Socialist Realism in the article of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Newspaper).

When Meyerhold directed *The Forest* and *The Government Inspector*, the origi-

nal texts were rearranged according to his principles of montage. But for 33 *Swoons* instead of montage he used music to underline and highlight moments of swoons. Each swoon was accompanied by a piece of music. For the male characters wind instruments were used. For the female characters Meyerhold chose stringed instruments. The piano was used for philosophical abstract moments. Music didn't create mood, but helped to exaggerate the meaning of swoons. For *The Proposal* Tchaikovsky's music was used. For *The Anniversary* Meyerhold chose the music of Johann Strauss, Offenbach and others. For *The Bear* the romantic music of Greig was used. Meyerhold reflected on the importance of the swoon in his production.

Yesterday we agreed that pieces without the swoons should not be acted, so to speak, should be glided over. From the actors we must get a boring impression. We must accept this, because the more colourless they are, the more colourful the swoons become.⁷

The following chapters survey each farce. All lines of Chekhov's farces are translated by Ronald Hingley.⁸

¹ The Anniversary

Shipuchin...M.A.Chikul

Tatyana...E.A.Tyapkina

Khirin...A.V.Kelberer

Mrs.Merchutkin...N.I.Serebryannikova

² The Bear

Mrs.Popov...Z.H.Raikh

Smirnov...N.I.Bogolyubov

Luke...S.V.Kozikov

³ The Proposal

Chubukov...V.A.Gromov

Natasha...E.V.Loginova

Lomov...I.V.Illinsky

² Braun, E., *Meyerhold-A Revolution in Theatre*, Methuen, 1995, p.10 (*V.E.Meierhold-Statyi,pisma,rechi,besedy vol.1*, Iskusstvo,1968, p.120)

³ *V.E.Meierhold, Statyi,pisma,rechi,besedy vol.2*, Iskusstvo,1968, p.310

⁴ *A.P.Chekhov – Polnoe sobranie cochnenii i picem vol.12*, Nauka, 1978, p.397

⁵ *A.P.Chekhov – Polnoe sobranie cochnenii i picem vol.11*, p.427.

⁶ Sato,S.,*The World of Chekhov’s Plays*, Chikuma Shobo,1980,p.9.

佐藤清郎 『チェーホフ劇の世界』筑摩書房1980年、9頁

⁷ *Meierhold repetiruet 2*, 《Artist.Rezhissep.Teatr》,1993, pp.161-162.

⁸ Anton Chekhov, *Twelve Plays*, translated by Ronald Hingley, Oxford University Press, 1992.

The Anniversary

Meyerhold gave his lecture titled ‘My work on Chekhov’ at the Arts Masters Club on 11 May 1935. Regarding *The Anniversary* Meyerhold explained as follows.

Therefore, from my point of view, all producers who staged this farce made a mistake. They didn’t take into account of the situation. They didn’t think that the main blow should be aimed at Shipuchin’s head. They didn’t take mainly him in hand.¹

Meyerhold directed this piece as a ‘farce of situation’. Shipuchin was a variant of

Khlestakov-swindler, scoundrel and thief. It is well-known that *The Anniversary* is adapted from the short story of *The Defenceless Woman*. In the short story the brazen woman torments the chairman of the bank who is suffering from rheumatism. In the farce Mrs.Merchutkin visits Shipuchin who is preparing the ceremony of the 15th Anniversary. He writes the shareholder's address and buys a silver tankard as a gift from shareholders. Shipuchin is irritated because his wife Tatyana and Mrs.Merchutkin are disturbing him. He is not just an oversensitive chairman, but a calculating banker. Therefore Meyerhold started *The Anniversary* with Shipuchin's line.

'My dear, good Khirin'-Shipuchin with a top hat didn't look at Khirin. Meyerhold cut their kiss and underscored their hatred for each other. Khirin was hustled into calculating the anniversary report. He moved his fingers in the air like a conductor. Shipuchin was fidgety. Though he said 'I'm worn out' and fell down, he was not tired at all and always acting. 'I wrote the address myself – and as for the tankard, well, I bought that too'-Shipuchin confessed to Khirin and laughed over his own invention. He showed a Mephistophelean attitude at this moment. His wife Tatyana was a nuisance. She spoke so quickly that she was out of breath.



She was laughing and flitting about the room.

Meyerhold inserted a small scene before her kiss on Shipuchin. When she came in, Khirin escaped from the room and Shipuchin also slipped off. Young men tried to rush her. They followed her and reacted to her chat by laughing. Shipuchin came back to meet her. Tatyana's chat disturbed his concentration with the report. Then Mrs. Merchutkin appeared. This defenceless woman moaned about her husband's payment and handed her petition to Shipuchin. In the meantime Tatyana was busy with make-up. Then she ran after Khirin who hid under the desk or inside the shelf. She wanted to tell about her sister's romance. Shipuchin turned her out of the room. Afterwards she made merriment backstage. In this production Mrs. Merchutkin was not just a fool who didn't listen to others. She was incensed about the 24 roubles and 36 copecks which her husband's office docked from his salary. She never accepted the explanation of her misconception. Shipuchin was pained. He acted as if his teeth were being pulled out. Mrs. Merchutkin didn't care. She said 'Then tell them to give me 15 roubles'. He groaned. Music came in. 'Pity a helpless orphan, sir. I'm a weak, defenceless woman'-she knelt. Shipuchin leaned on the banisters. 'My head's going round and round'-he was leaving. Mrs. Merchutkin quietly followed him. Now Khirin had to manage this mad woman. But he couldn't keep his temper. 'If you won't clear out, I'll pulverize you, you old horror'-he said this as if he was getting into a swoon.

Shipuchin and Tatyana came back. He was exhausted and gave up persuading her. Mrs. Merchutkin got 25 roubles from Shipuchin and left the room. Tatyana started talking about the suicide of her sister's boyfriend. Suddenly Mrs. Merchutkin came up and asked for a job for her husband. Shipuchin stepped away-'Get rid of her, chuck her out, for God's sake!' Khirin picked up the revolver and loaded 5 bullets. Khirin was going up to Tatyana-'You clear out!' Shipuchin rushed to the shelf to protect her-'No, not her'. He saw the gun was pointed at him. Then he

tried to hide behind the wife. Mrs. Merchutkin disappeared into the shelf. Khirin joyfully tore up Shipuchin's document.

In the finale Meyerhold made a device. The bank clerks brought the stuffed bear into the room. A shortsighted shareholder read the address to the bear – 'Mr.Shipuchin, our dear and most respected friend...'. Meyerhold finished this farce with a silent scene like Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. The swooning ladies were held by their husbands. Shipuchin also dragged Tatyana and threw her down. There were 14 swoons in *The Anniversary*.

Meyerhold exaggerated the madness. Yuzovsky criticized it.

In Chekhov's farce strange people hang around. In Meyerhold's production mad people run about.²

The Anniversary, however, is one of the most satirical piece of Chekhov's plays. Ekaterina Gorbunova, who attended the rehearsals as a student of GITIS Theatre Academy, valued Meyerhold's stylized farce as follows.

Behind the fantastic exaggeration the audience obviously made out the reality of the present rather than the past.³

¹ V.E.Meierkhold-Statyi,pisma,rechi,besedy Vol.2, p.313.

² Meierkhold v russkoi teatralnoi kritike, p.457

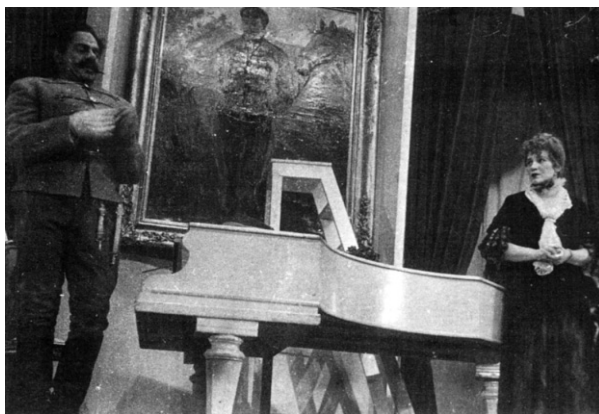
³ Gorbunova,E., Meierkhold repetiruet *«Tridtsati tri obmoroka»* , Agraf,2002,p.28.

The Bear

There were 8 swoons in *The Bear*. Swoons were accompanied with Grieg's

romance. Chekhov described Mrs.Popov as a young widow with dimpled cheeks. Meyerhold interpreted her as “Tartuffe in the skirt” or “nearly Dona Anna” who became a prostitute.¹ On the stage the audience saw a huge portrait of her deceased husband and his horse Toby. In front of the portrait there was a white grand piano with a bouquet of red roses. Obviously she was acting a sorrowful heroine. Meyerhold started this farce with Mrs.Popov’s monologue. ‘Now you shall see how I can love and forgive, Nicholas’. During this monologue she checked herself in the mirror.

The old manservant Luke was a sort of clown. He moved quickly and spoke loudly. This old servant looked after the mistress just like Firs cared for Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard*. Luke tried to cheer her up and said ‘Have Toby or Giant harnessed and go and see the neighbours’. Toby’s name gave her an opportunity to weep. Luke brought her a glass of water. When she started playing the piano, a guest arrived. The visitor violently rang the bell again and again. Smirnov entered. The lieutenant of artillery-retired saluted and took off his hat, gloves and saber in the Petersburg’s manner. Then the audience realized that this landowner was a look-alike for the Nicholas in the portrait. He introduced himself and began to talk



about Nicholas's debt. His attitude was completely changed. 'I'm not accustomed to these peculiar expressions and this tone. I have closed my ears' – Mrs.Popov left from the room.

The Bear/Smirnov stayed alone on the stage. His monologue was spoken to the audience. 'I'm so furious' – he puffed and panted. The swoon began. He grabbed his hair, unbuttoned his coat and lay down on the sofa. Luke brought him a glass of water, then a big glass of vodka.

Mrs.Popov came back. Smirnov declared 'I'll stick around here til I do get my money'. She accused him of rudeness. As a misogynist Smirnov started talking about his bad experiences with women. In excitement he destroyed a chair. The widow exploded anger with unfaithful men, especially her deceased husband. Smirnov laughed at her widow's weeds because he knew what she was expecting. Their argument was heated up. Luke was anxious and falling into a faint. In the end Mrs.Popov accepted Smirnov's challenge to a duel.

When she left to get pistols, Smirnov jumped for joy. Then he sat on the piano as if he rode horse-back. He moved about the top like a bear with dreamy eyes – 'I definitely like her...' When Mrs.Popov directed a pistol at Smirnov, he stood to attention with a happy smile. His declaration of love was sung on the stairs – 'I love you as I never loved any of my twenty-one other women...' But she didn't accept his courtship immediately. 'Just go away. But wait. No, go, go away. Or no – don't go away' – According to Meyerhold this is the subtext for Mrs.Popov through the entire farce. Meyerhold didn't follow Chekhov's comment '(Mrs.Popov) tears a handkerchief in her anger'. Mrs.Popov looked at the mirror which showed her how Smirnov knelt down and begged for love. Eventually she swooned. She fell down on the sofa and said softly – 'We'll sh-shoot it out!' Finally the bear was trapped.

She kept him waiting by applying make up and preparing her hair. Then they

kissed in front of the portrait of Nicholas. During the prolonged kiss, Smirnov swept off someone's gift-bouquet from the grand piano.

The Bear was rated as the most successful piece in *33 swoons*. One of the reasons was that Meyerhold's wife Zinaida Raikh who played Mrs. Popov understood the director's concept. Also she was very good at coquettish roles like Anna in *The Government Inspector* and Marguerite in *The Lady of the Camellias*.

In this farce Meyerhold revealed the misogynist and the widow. He presented their hypocrisy rather than their desire for possessions. In *The Bear* the characters argued about debt. But Meyerhold didn't expand this argument into social problems. As Yuzovsky wrote 'The Bear is closest to Chekhov in three farces directed by Meyerhold',² the audience really enjoyed the psychological game on the stage. This piece could be rated as a 'character farce'.

¹ *Rezhisser Meierkhold*, p.478.

² *Meierkhold v russkoi teatralnoi kritike*, p.464.

The Proposal

In the last part of *33 Swoons* Meyerhold satirized the landowner's conflict. It was directed as a typical 'farce of situations'. There were 11 swoons in this piece. Ilinsky who was considered to be one of the best actors at the Meyerhold Theatre took the part of Lomov.

Gladkov conveyed Meyerhold's words in his essay titled "Meyerhold talks".

We were too clever by half, and consequently lost sight of the humour. We must look the truth in the face: the audience at any amateur production of *The Proposal* would laugh more than they did at our theatre, even though Ilinsky

was acting and Meyerhold was the director. Chekhov's light, transparent humour could not bear the weight of ideas, and the result was a failure.¹

Ilinsky also said that the production grew heavy because actions were framed by the swoons.² In rehearsal Meyerhold showed his example of Lomov's palpitation. At the beginning Lomov put his head on left side to listen to his own heartbeat. Then he grabbed the left lapel of his tail coat and twisted it off. He then put his right hand on his heart. The gestures had to be built up correctly.³

The Proposal started with the additional scene in which Chubukov drove a cat out by a broom. When he left from the room, Lomov in a duster cloak came in and took a seat. He jumped off the chair with Chubukov's shout - 'Who is there?' This introduction underscored Chubukov's first lines - 'Why it's Ivan Lomov - or do my eyes deceive me, old boy? Delighted.' Chubukov pretended to welcome the troublesome neighbour who was crazy to go to law. The cat came back just at the moment Chubukov offered a chair. Chubukov pursued the cat. Meanwhile Lomov took off his duster cloak and opened the package wrapped with newspapers. Then he put on a silk hat and gloves. He protected his formal clothes from



dust even though it was a very hot day. Obviously his tail coat was too small and he was sweating badly. 'But why so formal, old boy-the tails, the gloves and so on?' –Chubukov asked him with some exasperation. Lomov couldn't continue to speak without drinking water –'Well, you see, my dear Dubukov – my dear Chubukov, I mean, sorry-that's to say, I'm terribly jumpy, as you see...' His speech lacked the point. At last he took the hat off and lightly fainted –'The fact is, I'm here to ask for the hand of your daughter Natasha.' Chubukov was taken aback and grunted in surprise. Then he laughed as if he was tickled.

In the next scene Lomov read his monologue towards audience. His business like tone showed his egoism, calculation and self-love. Before Natasha's entrance, a maid Mashka carried a pile of plates into the room. This was a silent role which Meyerhold added to the original script. Mashka made noise during the next arguments. Natasha came in . She wondered about his formal clothes. He had to explain again. 'You're bound to be surprised-angry, even. But I-' Lomov reeled and moved to side to drink water. His legs gave way and his teeth chattered on the glass - 'I feel terribly cold'. Natasha wondered what happened. Lomov began by telling about the friendship between Lomovs and Chubukovs. His speech was fluent as it were learnt by heart. Suddenly Natasha stopped him – 'Sorry to butt in, but you refer to Oxpen Field as yours?' Their quarrel about ownership of the Oxpen Field was shown by 'play with objects'. They were snatching a tray and a napkin from each other. Rudnitsky indicated that 'play with objects' oversimplified and broke a mainspring of the farce.⁴

The next argument about their dogs was called 'dog's pantomime'. Lomov and Natasha barked at each other. It was a climax of this farce which satirized their proprietary ambition. Meyerhold's exaggeration was highly rated in the review of *Izvestya* (29 March 1935).

In this production Meyerhold combined conventions and realism which was correctly understood.⁵

When Lomov and Natasha became reconciled and kissed each other, a couple with bouquets broke in. A man gave white flowers to Lomov and a lady gave red flowers to Natasha. Then two couples danced quadrille.

In the end Chubukovs and Lomov celebrated the engagement with champagne, but they shipped as if they took quinine. 'You can see those two are going to live happily ever after' – Chubukov's line suggested their long boring family life.

Chekhov wrote palpitation, heart attack and swoons in this farce. As a doctor he knew how bodies reacted to excitement. Meyerhold was interested in these symptoms and tried to manifest neurasthenia amongst the intelligentsia of late 19th century. But these characters were not neurotics. They were extremely passionate. If they were passive and weak-willed, they didn't have such arguments. According to Rudnitsky, this contradiction was a cause for the failure.⁶

¹ Gladkov,A, *Meierkhold govorit*, Novy mir, No.8, 1961, p.228.

² Rudnitsky, K.L., *Rezhisser Meierkhold*, 1969, p.474

³ Valentei,M.A. and others (ed.), *Vstrechi s Meierkholdom*, 1967,p.482

⁴ Rudnitski,K.L.,*Rezhisser Meierkhold*, p.477.

⁵ *Meierkhold v russkoi teatralnoi kritike 1920-1938*, 《Artist.Rezhisser. Teatr》, 2000, p.454.

⁶ Rudnitski,K.L.,*Rezhisser Meierkhold*, p.454.

Epilogue

As mentioned in the introduction Chekhov's words about theatre arts influenced Meyerhold's work. His style was always changing, but he consistently pursued

theatricality. *33 Swoons* was a suggestive attempt to interpret Chekhov's farces as satire. In this production he stylized swoons to show the neurasthenia of the bourgeoisie.

Swoons are definitely notable elements in these farces. They are not just conventional gestures of surprise or shock. Chekhov mentioned the character's tension, frustration and fatigue by swoons. Meyerhold tried to expand this psychological condition into a social situation. *33 Swoons* reminded us of Erdman's play *The Warrant* (1925) in which Meyerhold showed the nepmen/petty bourgeois in the form of the grotesque. Meyerhold's conception of the grotesque was defined in his essay titled 'The Fairground Booth' (1912). 'The grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity', 'The grotesque deepens life's outward appearance to the point where it ceases to appear merely natural.'¹ In *The Warrant* Meyerhold mixed nepmen's avarice and anxiety. Their insanity suddenly got frozen in silent scenes. Stanislavsky saw this play at the Meyerhold's Theatre and highly valued the production. *The Warrant* could be called as *The Government Inspector* in NEP (New Economic Policy) period. Meyerhold wanted to show *33 Swoons* to Stanislavsky and tried to arrange the private performance just for him. Unfortunately, this plan couldn't come off.² The critics who saw this production perceived the aspects of the grotesque. Belitsky criticized Meyerhold's direction.

This is not a farce. This is a tragi-comedy. This is an emotional satire on the fatal disease of class society. But all the same Chekhov wrote a farce.³

It might be too ambitious to stage Chekhov's farces as satire. In his plays the inner meanings are very important. Their expression should be delicate and sensible. But we should not forget Antosha Chekhonte's bitter irony as well. Intentionally,

Meyerhold was not concerned with psychology in this production. Despite a well-planned *mise en scène* the swoons were not justification for his direction. Yuzovsky considered *33 Swoons* a failure, but he knew the importance of this production.

But this is a precious loss. Because he gambled his thought and idea. Before passing the final sentence, it should be taken into account. That's all about Chekhov and Meyerhold's *33 Swoons*.⁴

Altman reviewed *33 Swoons* in the newspaper *Izvestiya* on 29 March 1935. He finished the review as follows.

At the Meyerhold Theatre Chekhov was much read and well understood. Chekhov's characters were presented in a new way. And the audience laughed a lot.⁵

Altman also pointed out the problem of soviet theatre. According him Meyerhold's production was a demand for contemporary comedies and farces on Chekhov's level.⁶ In the speech on 11 May 1935 Meyerhold agreed with Altman.⁷ Indeed, he needed new playwrights. Nobody replaced Mayakovsky who supplied masterpieces to Meyerhold.

Socialist Realism was inconsistent with Meyerhold's stylized theatre. Socialist Realism required empathy to affirmative characters. Meyerhold theatrically exaggerated the absurdities of negative characters. It didn't take much time before the dogmatic campaign against formalism started. The Meyerhold Theatre was considered a symbol of formalism. After *33 swoons* new Meyerhold's productions did not pass censorship and the Meyerhold Theatre was liquidated in January

1938.

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- ¹ Braun,E., *The Theatre of Meyerhold*, p. 74.
- ² V.E.Meierkhold-Statyi, *pisma, rechi, becedy*, vol.1, pp.226-227
- ³ *Meierkhold v russkoi teatralnoi kritike*, p.473
- ⁴ *Ibid.*,p.470.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*,p.455.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*,p.453.
- ⁷ V.E.Meierkhold-Statyi, *pisma, rechi, becedy*, vol.2, p.311.

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