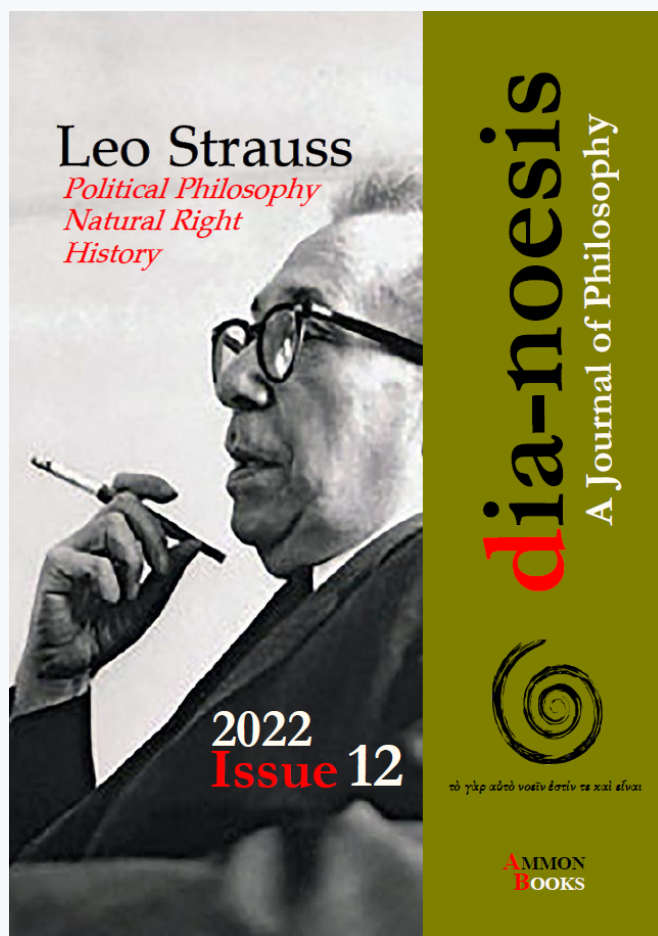


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Enlightenment, modernity and democracy: Leo Strauss, H. L. Mencken and the new political science

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Abstract: This essay seeks to demonstrate a certain overlap between the political thought of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and H. L. Mencken (1888-1956). The argument fully recognizes that Strauss is a political philosopher inclined to the classics and natural right, and Mencken is a journalist inclined to the moderns and the power of scientific progress, they nevertheless occupy the same terrain in respect of certain opinions on the purely political plane. Allowing a great distance between the two men philosophically speaking, we can still see them come together in arguing that a regime which looks up to certain individuals of ability, talents, character, intellect and virtue has to be the standard by which the discipline of political science makes its judgments concerning the phenomena of political life.

Keywords: *Strauss, Mencken, Enlightenment, Modernity, Democracy, Bryce, Tocqueville, Statesmen, Greatness*

Introduction

In the discussion which follows I attempt to connect certain strands of Strauss's thought to that of H.L. Mencken in somewhat the same way as one might connect the thought of William James to the output of Walter Lippmann. At first blush it might seem somewhat far-fetched to draw a line of connection between Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and Henry Louis Mencken (1888-1956). To consider these two men within a single range of vision is to court the possibility of a fool's errand. After all, it is a comparatively easy step to reveal that Mencken by no means belongs in any kind of "Straussian" fold that might be "checking ID's" so to speak. This can be shown by simply stating the known and accepted facts of Mencken's case – he is a modernistic, atheistic, Spinozistic, scientistic, skeptical and enlightenment thinker and that is all there is to it. But in the case of Mencken it is really impossible to leave things at that and thus close his file. This can be shown by considering certain elements in both his and Strauss's thought that serve to reveal how intrinsically complicated Mencken's relationship to a figure like Strauss might be.

Eastern Wisdom, Western Freedom and the Fate of Socrates

Mencken defines the very difference between East and West in terms of the intelligibility of the notion of "individual autonomy and right." He allows that things both "kindly and humane" may well have been as intelligible in the East as in they were in the West, but this was not the case with regard to the specific notion of freedom. Simply put, anything like the idea of individuality in the western sense would have been unintelligible in the East. The reason for this, Mencken explains, is that in the East every right was subordinated to duty – "the duty to obey the constituted authorities, to labour unquestioningly for the common weal, to act right and, above all, to think right."¹

What is striking here is that Mencken's version of the East

¹ Mencken, 1930: 258-259

reminds us of Leo Strauss's version of pre-modernity. Strauss explained in any number of his writings that in ancient times, or more precisely, until the time of the impact of Hobbes, duty or virtue took priority over individuality or freedom without further ado. Strauss famously said that Edmund Burke "was still too deeply imbued with the spirit of 'sound antiquity' to allow the concern with individuality to overpower the concern with virtue."² By contrast we can say of Mencken that he simply had no confidence in the "soundness" of antiquity. This is because his thoroughly modern philosophical premises went so deep that to elevate even a quasi-ancient like Burke to the heights we see in Strauss's comment would make no sense to him: Spinoza, Hobbes and the Moderns – Yes! Strauss, Burke and the Ancients – No!

According to Mencken, the skeptics of Babylon, such as they were, refrained from public criticism of the authorities lest they be persecuted for it, even unto death.³ So it was that we had to wait for the arrival of the Greeks to experience that "free speculation we are now so familiar with." Although the Greeks were by no means the first philosophers, they were "the first to make philosophy the first concern of man." They were in fact the first of the world's peoples to make any concerted attempt to liberate the human mind. With them, men began to think "frankly, boldly, rationally" about things as they had never thought before.⁴

Mencken claims that after the famous trial and execution of Socrates "All the prevailing ideas of government were exposed to a new and candid examination, and with them all the prevailing ideas about the nature of the physical world, the qualities and powers of the gods, and the character of the thinking process itself."⁵ So in some strange and ironical twist of history, the fate of Socrates did not end up sending a message to the philosophers that they should "clam up." It seems rather to have emboldened them to become denouncers

² Strauss, 1965: 323

³ See Strauss, 1952 and Melzer, 2014

⁴ Mencken, 1930: 259

⁵ Mencken, 1930: 259.

and iconoclasts.⁶ If Mencken insinuates that the Greek thinkers should have been as iconoclastic at certain points before Socrates, as they somehow became after him, he is nevertheless glad that in the post-Socratic era they came around to his position and set out to boldly expose the great theologico-political frauds of the age.

So, a tradition of a kind of “minority report” existing side by side with “mainstream values” was finally established in the West. The habit became ingrained on the part of a “very small class of men” of rejecting as palpably false the prevailing ideas of the age. Indeed, as Mencken understands him, Jesus himself came under the spell of the Greek philosophers and this explains his life’s story. He was “a well-educated young Jew, who manifested an audacious defiance of the priests at Jerusalem.” In 20th Century terms, Mencken explains, this was the equivalent of “heaving the (American) Constitution into the fire, and the Bible and the Revised Statutes after it.”⁷

The Transition to Modernity

In the light of Mencken’s views about the condition of philosophy in antiquity it appears that the more substantive divergence between Mencken and Strauss has to do with their specific attitudes to modern philosophy. For Strauss the transition to modernity beginning with Machiavelli, and then on through his famous “Three Waves”⁸ was in fact a “wrong turn” that the world would have been much better off not to take. Mencken’s attitude to the rise of modernity is more or less the polar opposite of this view. Mencken has very little to say if anything about Machiavelli, but he is sure that the world was saved by the arrival on the scene of Baruch Spinoza. Indeed, it was during the 17th Century that all of the basic discoveries were made and from that point on “everywhere knowledge of the visible world was widening day by day.”⁹

⁶ See *Apology of Socrates* 39c-d

⁷ Mencken, 1930: 259-260

⁸ Strauss, 1975:81-98

⁹ Mencken, 1930: 260

Mencken says that Spinoza launched an earth-shattering “onslaught” upon “the inspired inerrancy of the Pentateuch” in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). Before him the learned Spanish rabbi, Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra, may well have “unearthed many absurdities in the Bible” but it was Spinoza who opted to speak in a much louder voice and adopt a more confrontational approach, all to the great approval of Mencken.¹⁰

Equally gratifying to Mencken was the fact that in the face of efforts to suppress his work, Spinoza managed to see to it that “enough copies got out to reach the proper persons” and from this moment onward “the Old Testament has been under searching and devastating examination.” It was especially thinkers in Germany who took up Spinoza’s torch to such an extent that the Germans “have had more to do with (Spinozian criticism) than any other people.” In fact, so much has this been the case that American Christians tend “to think of the so-called Higher Criticism is a German invention.”¹¹

The amazing historical fact here, is that at exactly the moment Mencken was making these arguments in the United States, Strauss was introducing to the world his revolutionary critique of Spinoza. The irony to note in this context is that unlike most American commentators, Mencken knew German and would have been in a position to read Strauss’s Spinoza book “hot of the press” if it had come across his transom.¹² If indeed he had been in a position to read Strauss’s book, Mencken would have seen it argued that Spinoza in particular, and early modern philosophy was prone to certain deficiencies and oversights, especially when compared to its medieval and

¹⁰ Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra, (1092/93 - 1167) has sometimes been categorized as a Neoplatonic pantheist who was in some degree a precursor of Spinoza.

¹¹ Mencken, 1930: 230. Hobbes is alleged to have said that “he durst not write so boldly” as did Spinoza in his *Theologico-Politico Tractatus*. Edwin M. Curley notes that “Leo Strauss was fond of (this) passage, since it lends support to his interpretation of Hobbes as an atheist, forced by the repression of his times to conceal his atheism in a cloak of insincere professions of (relative) religious orthodoxy.” Curley, 1992: 498

¹² Strauss, 1930. Mencken made seven visits to Germany all told with the last being in 1938 just prior to the outbreak of World War II.

ancient counterparts.

The 18th Century Legacy and the Study of Democracy

No one looked on the great European Enlightenment more favorably than Mencken. His almost complete allegiance to the moderns is made manifest when he says that “By the middle of the 18th Century what Nietzsche was later to call a transvaluation of all values was in full blast.” In all honesty, “Nothing sacred was spared - not even the classical spirit that had been the chief attainment of the Renaissance - and of the ideas and attitudes that were attacked not many survived.”¹³ The needfulness for any such practice as philosophical “esotericism” had come and gone by this time. From here on it was a “no holds barred” attitude that was obligatory on true intellectuals or *philosophes*. “It was no longer necessary to give even lip service to the old preposterous certainties, whether theological or political, aesthetic or philosophical.” In the particular case of France, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot succeeded in making “a bonfire of all the Christian superstitions” while in England Edward Gibbon revolutionized the science of history and Adam Smith founded the new science of economics. Meanwhile over in Mencken’s ancestral homeland, Immanuel Kant “was pondering an ethical scheme that would give the Great Commandment a new dignity.”¹⁴

Mencken’s account of the historical influence of the skeptical school sees the fear of God diminishing in the minds of men with the passage of time. This ongoing process set men free to give some serious attention to the “amenities” of life and to the comfort and luxury which accompanies such refocused attention. Once European man had thrown off all “the old gloomy dread of post-mortem penalties and retributions” he could now set out to enjoy himself in a world that grew “ever more pleasant.” And from this process there stems the absolute *piece de resistance* of civilization itself – “the cultivation of

¹³ Mencken, 1930: 291-292

¹⁴ Mencken, 1930: 293

leisure.”¹⁵

For Mencken, urbanity follows the spreading influence of philosophical skepticism as surely as night follows day. Indeed, “urbanity” itself is the “hallmark” of increasing cultural doubtfulness, and it is this doubting spirit that allowed the human race, “at least on its upper levels,” to vastly improve its manners. With the possibility of true leisure secured, a period in human history ensued where life was never “lived more delightfully, or been, in any true sense, more civilized.”¹⁶

But there is one point that Mencken makes in passing here that seems to compromise his whole case, at least in part. He specifies that the immense and liberating achievements of the historical waves of skeptical thought and the triumphs of the Enlightenment were more or less confined to the “upper levels” of society. In other words, even allowing Mencken’s account of the leaps of the human mind towards higher levels of civilization to be simply true, the “Old Adam” of a fundamental distinction between the Few and the Many perdured, and Mencken never loses sight of this fact in all of his writings. At one point he pronounces in no uncertain terms that “(T)he progress of enlightenment affects the great masses of men but little” and that the advancement of learning “is a matter which concerns exclusively a small minority of men.” Moreover, “no imaginable scheme of education will ever bridge the gap between the great masses of men and the intelligent minority.”¹⁷ What this in fact means is that Mencken has to give a wink to the ancients however firmly he is committed to the legacy of Spinoza, Hobbes, Voltaire, Kant and the *philosophes* over that of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas et. al. In short, for Mencken the disappearance of the need for esotericism is not exactly identical to the disappearance of the distance between the elite and the masses or the Few and the Many.

At one point, Strauss alludes to Mencken’s favorite period as the age of “the great eighteenth century philosophical analysis.” He does so in order to show how for Alexis de

¹⁵ Mencken, 1930: 293

¹⁶ Mencken, 1930: 293

¹⁷ Mencken, 1955: 105-106.

Tocqueville this heritage was an immediate and palpable intellectual force. But in the case of Mencken, even with all his great admiration for the 18th Century, we see someone who is so remote from it that he is more inclined to refer to political thinking more or less contemporary with his own. This contradiction derives from Mencken's feeling that in the 20th Century, Tocqueville is in some sense "obsolete" or "out of date," as Strauss indicates he in fact is in but only with respect to certain specific subsequent historical developments.

Mencken's "blind spot" here can be shown by considering Strauss's suggestion to his students that with regards to the question of natural right's relation to the thought of Tocqueville, the study of Burke and Paine can help them get rightly oriented to the subject. Mencken himself, not having heard of or followed Strauss's recommendations to his students, proceeds to base his arguments on the shifting sands of post-natural right or "nihilist" thought more likely to be associated with the name of Max Weber than those of Burke or Paine. To be sure Strauss does suggest that a slight inkling of Max Weber's "insoluble value conflict" is available in Tocqueville, but by the time we get to Mencken pure "Weberism" has taken over the field completely, especially in Germany.¹⁸

So, as it turned out, Mencken was making his broadsides against democracy for its lack of concern for excellence, high culture, integrity, decency and so on, at a moment when his much admired ancestral homeland, on the level of theory at least, had already gone over to Weber and had long since given over such concerns to the realm of subjective values. Mencken looked to Germany as a model for high cultural and socio-ethical standards, but even as he did so, Germany had become the *avante-garde* for those arguing to the world that all preferences be they decent or not are intrinsically valid.¹⁹

But however, much Tocqueville might be compromised by a tincture of "Weberism" pervading his thought, Strauss is sure that his analysis of democracy is "perfectly sound for most

¹⁸ See Strauss, 1965: 35-80

¹⁹ Strauss, 1965: 2

practical purposes.”²⁰ Mencken concurs with him here, at least on the question of Tocqueville’s account of the causes of corruption under democratic conditions. He readily concedes that the Frenchman dealt with this question in a satisfactory manner. Reciprocally, Strauss is willing to concede something to Mencken’s dismissiveness of Tocqueville, in that while the Frenchman’s thought is perfectly satisfactory, not to say indispensable on the practical plane, there are nevertheless “little difficulties” in his pages “which bear in them the germ of great practical dangers.”²¹ The problem as Strauss frames it, is that Tocqueville ultimately turned his back “the kind of reasonable inequality corresponding to merit.” In other words, he dogmatically accepted the democratic notion that “justice is simply identical with equality.”²² This is something of which Mencken could never be accused.

Bryce and Tocqueville

We know that it is basically fair to accuse Mencken of being remiss in not spending more time on political philosophy. As a result of this choice, he has to be placed many rungs down the ladder from Strauss in this respect.²³ But we do know that both Strauss and Mencken read Lord Bryce’s *Modern Democracies* (1921). This is an arresting fact because we have Strauss on record as having stated that *Modern Democracies* is “the next great book” after Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in the field of modern democratic studies. To be sure, Strauss does not wish to be taken as saying that Bryce’s work is actually equal in rank to that of Tocqueville. But he does state clearly that Bryce “may be correct in many points where Tocqueville saw wrong.”²⁴ Given Strauss’s reference to

²⁰ Strauss, 1962:12

²¹ Strauss, 1962:12.

²² Strauss, 1962: 11

²³ Terry Teachout observes that Mencken does not appear “to have read widely in the classics of political philosophy...He seems, for instance, never to have read Tocqueville, who was no less critical of democracy.” Teachout, 2002:126.

²⁴ Strauss, 1962:1

the one book we know for certain both he and Mencken read, let us briefly consider some of the opinions they volunteer on the nature of democracy in connection with Bryce's volumes.

Mencken explains to his audience that if they take the time to read Bryce's *Modern Democracies* they will observe how he "amasses incontrovertible evidence that democracy doesn't work." What Mencken is driving at here is the view that, while being the very antithesis of the old religion, democracy has in effect, become a substitute for it. Democracy "has the power to enchant and disarm" and "shows all the magical potency of the great systems of faith." And like the old systems of faith "it is (just) not vulnerable to logical attack" as is demonstrated by "the appalling gyrations and contortions of its chief exponents."²⁵

So far, so good. Bryce's "two fat volumes" would appear to be a very profitable read for the student of democracy. But then unfortunately for his standing in Mencken's eyes, Bryce "concludes with a stout declaration that (democracy) does (in fact work)"²⁶ Mencken explains that the "mystical gurgle" at the end of *Modern Democracies* involves a sincere hope that "the mob will one day grow intelligent, despite the colossal improbability of it." So for Mencken, all Bryce ultimately succeeds in achieving is to beg the question of "how in spite of the incurable imbecility of the great masses of men are we to a reasonable measure of sense and decency into the world?"²⁷ This problem induces Mencken to suggest that Bryce's analysis of democracy "obviously lies outside the range of logical ideas." Hence it is impossible "by any device known to philosophers," to meet its claims.²⁸

²⁵ Mencken, 1926:197

²⁶ Mencken, 1926:197.

²⁷ Mencken, 1970:122

²⁸ Mencken, 1970:122

What Political Science Needs

If Mencken is so truly dismissive of Lord Bryce's efforts as a political scientist, what does he himself have in mind for a more effective and rewarding approach within the discipline? His recommendation here is for political science to take up the "realistic investigation of the careers" of all of those leaders who have succeeded under democratic conditions. The goal here would be to make "a scientific attempt to deduce the principles upon which they worked."²⁹

Forty years later, Strauss seems to be responding to Mencken's suggestion when in 1965 he delivered some *ex-tempore* remarks on hearing of the passing of Winston Churchill. For Strauss, Churchill's passing serves as "a healthy reminder to academic students of political science of the limitations of their craft." The great man's demise should remind all political scientists that they have no higher or more pressing duty, than to remind themselves and their students of the phenomena of "political greatness, human greatness, (and) the peaks of human excellence." This does not mean that political scientists have a duty to be hagiographical but rather that they have a duty to see things as they "actually are." And what this means above all, Strauss says, is that they should see things in "all their greatness and their misery, their excellence and their vileness, their nobility and their triumphs." In other words, they should never make the mistake of confusing "mediocrity, however brilliant, for true greatness."³⁰

Allowing for differences of time and place amongst other considerations, it is almost as if Strauss's words here could have issued from the mouth of Mencken. They convey a sense that the two men had much in common when it came to the requirements for an effective political science. For both men, the phenomenon of human greatness and political

²⁹ Mencken, 1922: 127-130. In this connection Mencken mentions the names of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt as possible examples. To say the least the figures of Lincoln and Roosevelt along with that of Churchill have played no small role in the field of Straussian scholarship in recent decades. See Strauss, 1965 Jaffa ed., 1982, di Lorenzo, 2003 and Yarborough, 2014

³⁰ Strauss, 2015.

magnanimity is a genuinely examinable scientific variable without consideration of which the true nature and implications of democratic politics can never be appreciated.³¹

Power Politics or a Better Regime?

Our sense of a connection between the thought of Strauss and Mencken is strengthened when we observe that both men take the “regime question” to be pivotal, i.e. they both think that political science has to begin with consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of Monarchical, Aristocratic and Democratic forms of rule and their affiliated variations. For both writers the study of politics is a “realist” science in the sense that it deals with the collision between the “Best Regime” or “Scientific Government” on the one hand, and the realities of the historical existent forms of government on the other. In other words, politics should be conceived of in the light of certain natural ethico-moral demands.³² We need only recall here that Strauss is on record as saying that he is “inclined to the opinion ...according to which Machiavelli is a teacher of evil,” and that Mencken is famous in part for saying that President Cleveland was “a good man in a bad trade.”³³

But for all this “moralism” it is perhaps not so surprising that Mencken could be accused of Nietzscheo-Machiavellian leanings given that he tends to situate them out front in his various discussions. But surprisingly enough in the case of the more subdued Strauss, we find that he has perhaps been more frequently accused of harboring deep-down Nietzscheo-Machiavellian tendencies however much he might have masqueraded as a “liberal” on the surface.³⁴ But for all this, it is plain as day that Mencken, just as much as Strauss, sees ethics and polity as standing together. No one makes more

³¹ See Strauss, 1988: 233-235

³² Mencken’s “Proposal for the Constitution of Maryland” makes this as clear as can be. For Mencken, the Maryland Constitution can be adjusted in light of our knowledge of what good government can be. Mencken, 1995: 327-340

³³ Strauss, 1958: 9; Mencken, 1982: 226-229.

³⁴ See Minowitz, 2009

heartfelt pleas for simple decency in political and social life than H.L. Mencken whatever his level of rascality otherwise. And for the political philosopher Strauss, politics and morality are two avenues that will always meet at the crossroads of political life. Even Mencken's enthusiastic scientism fails to dim the light by which he is called to assess the political world. In this respect he joins Strauss on *terra firma* when he writes about the socio-political, historical and cultural phenomena that may have attracted his attention.

While Mencken may be accused of a pronounced form of journalistic "amoralism" the fact is that he only likes to "flirt" with post-modern Nietzscheanism. But in no sense is he a genuinely consistent anarcho-nihilist. He may have been exceedingly hostile to the high moralism of the man he calls the "Archangel Woodrow,"³⁵ but he was not for this reason prepared to turn his back on such old-fashioned notions as simple human integrity.³⁶ And how could any kind of anarcho-nihilist look upon Bismarckian Germany with such favor as did Mencken.³⁷

If we allow ourselves to be guided Strauss's account of the history of political philosophy on this score, then we envisage Mencken as coming to a halt at one of the historicist way stations on the path of modernity. But having done so he failed to complete the full journey to the nihilist or "postmodernist" terminus which Strauss argues will always be waiting at the end of the mistaken road of modernity.

Conclusion

On the one hand Strauss could be described as an "Ellis Island" American, while Mencken was a "born and bred" American on the other. But whatever the distance between them represented by this biographical difference, their politico-philosophical standpoints are ultimately within hailing

³⁵ Mencken, 1982:248-251

³⁶ Terry Teachout argues that above all Mencken was a "Victorian" Teachout, 2002:17,118,125,157,208,244,344.

³⁷ Mencken, 1914

distance of one another. It is in the light of an ideal of the Best Regime that Mencken, the native son, condemns and contemns much of American life as being “at war with every clean and noble impulse of man.”³⁸ And by the same token we see that Strauss’s deep reflections on the nature of the Best Regime allow him both to indicate how distant from that ideal the actual American regime may in fact be, while at the same time permitting him to acknowledge the elements in American political life that point in that Regime’s direction.

For both Mencken and Strauss the American Founding endowed the nation with a noble tradition of enlightened statesmanship which should always be conveyed to American life as a whole, even as America has become estranged from its historical and philosophical roots. Strauss with his philosophical discipline and depth might join with the brilliant Mencken in saying that the Founding Fathers brought “active and original minds” to the quest for a “civilization of excellences” and so created a “hatchery of ideas” that gave rise to “nearly all the political theories we (should) cherish today.”³⁹ For both Strauss and Mencken the names of the Founding Fathers constitute a pantheon the legacy of which is well worth preserving. A heightened esteem for the signers of the *Declaration of Independence* and the framers of the *United States Constitution* would signal to both men that Nietzsche’s “Last Man” has not actually taken up residence in the various mansions of the Western house, even if he might be standing at her doorstep.

³⁸ Mencken, 1921:135

³⁹ Mencken, 1982:185. See Stenerson, 1971, 1987 and Rarner-Rosehagen, 2012: 52-57

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