

« EXCESSIVE STORYTELLING »
SEETZEN AS A PROTAGONIST
IN THE POSTMODERN ADVENTURE NOVEL
EMPTY QUARTER – RUB 'AL-KHALI (1996) BY MICHAEL ROES

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Abstract

In his novel *Empty Quarter – Rub 'al-Khali*, published in 1996, Berlin writer Michael Roes tells of a fictional traveller to the Orient, Ferdinand Alois Schnittke, who is searching for Moses's Tablets of the Law in the late eighteenth century. The reflections of the nameless, first-person narrator living in Yemen serve as a contrafaction to Schnittke's narrative. The postmodern anthropologist has discovered Schnittke's travel records and also starts a journey in search of the Western 'self', anthropological dimensions of games and gaming, and the roots of Orientalism in modern times. Echoing the style of Umberto Eco, Roes has written a brilliantly told postmodern adventure novel, which was also submitted as a Habilitation thesis in the subject of Ethnology at the Free University of Berlin. Moreover, in the appendix, Roes not only listed the various games that he observed and described in Yemen, but also he meticulously breaks down the sources used in the historical narrative section, including Ulrich Jasper Seetzen's *Travels through Syria* (posth. 1854–1859). My essay addresses the question of how (I) Roes's protagonist can be identified with Seetzen and (II) how orientalism, anthropology, and postmodern self-reflection are related in the novel.

Key Words

Orientalism; Postmodernism; Novel; Narration



When Berlin writer Michael Roes – a psychology graduate with an PhD in philosophy and experienced anthropologist (who has conducted field research in Palestine, Yemen, the United States, Mali and China) – published his extensive novel *Empty Quarter – Rub 'al-Khali* in autumn 1996, literary criticism and the public were equally enthusiastic about its narrative quality. The sales figures seemed to justify the reviews. Indeed, Roes had formally leaned on Umberto Eco's *The Name*

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of *the Rose* (1980) in the construction of his novel by developing two plot lines linked by an old manuscript (« Naturally, a manuscript »):¹ On the surface, Roes tells the story of an ethnologist who is doing some field research about Arab games in Yemen during the 1994 Civil War. This postmodern ethnologist carries an old manuscript in his luggage from around 1800 that was written by Ferdinand Alois Schnittke, the director of the Weimar puppet theatre who had been on the hunt for Moses's Tablets of the Law in Yemen almost two-hundred years earlier. As the two plot lines begin to cross, Roes uses the historical perspective as a prism to explore the problems of self-exploration and learning about the 'other' as well as the interplay of travel to the Orient with projections of this seemingly far away place.²

Above all, Schnittke's travel route is strikingly reminiscent of the real Orient traveller Ulrich Jasper Seetzen. Their itineraries have unmistakable parallels, which can be illustrated best in a tabular overview:

Travel route of Ulrich Jasper Seetzen	Travel route of Ferdinand Alois Schnittke
Gotha – Vienna	Weimar, Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Trieste, Venice
Istanbul	Istanbul
Aleppo	Tripolis
Damascus	Damascus
Amman	Mount Hermon
Gerasa (Jerash)	Negev
Jerusalem	Jerusalem
Sinai (Saint Catherine's Monastery)	Sinai (Saint Catherine's Monastery)
Cairo	Cairo
Jeddah	Jeddah
Mecca	—

¹ UMBERTO ECO, *The Name of the Rose*, transl. William Weaver, Harcourt Brace & Co., San Diego – New York – London 1983, p. 3.

² SEIRIOL DAFYDD, *Intercultural and Intertextual Encounters in Michael Roes's Travel Fiction*, Institute of Modern Languages Research, London 2015 (Bithell Series of Dissertations, 42); CHRISTOPH SCHMITT-MAAß, *Das gefährdete Subjekt. Selbst- und Fremdforschung in der deutschsprachigen Ethnopoese der Gegenwart* (Hubert Fichte, Hans Christoph Buch, Michael Roes), Synchron, Bielefeld 2011 (Diskursivitäten, 13).

Medina	—
Sanaa (Yemen)	Sanaa (Yemen)
Sayyan, Dhamar, Ṣafār	Wadi el Ain, Beni Gahim, Bejt Chuth
Aden (Yemen)	Aden (Yemen)
Mocha (Yemen)	Mocha (Yemen)
Ta'izz? / Marib? (lost)	Wadi Denne?/ Marib? (lost)

In addition to the geographical parallels and the tradition in the ethnographic indexing of *Arabia felix* in both journeys, there are other similarities in the obsession of both men with the hunt for Arab manuscripts. The real explorer Seetzen and the fictional character Schnittke, for example, both visit St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai in the hope of discovering particularly rare early Christian manuscripts. In his last message to the Duke of Gotha, Seetzen had in fact counted the manuscripts that he had recently acquired in Yemen among the « most delicious that I have received in the Orient ».³ Ultimately, these elements of a 'hero' plot reminiscent of *Indiana Jones* represent only one of the parallels between these two adventurers.

For instance, both Seetzen and Schnittke disappear: one vanishes in the desert sand of the Rub 'al-Khali, the other dissolves as the novel progresses. But, perhaps more importantly, both converted to Islam, indicating that they tried to adapt as much as possible to the culture that they were studying.⁴ These last two points – self-dissolution and cultural assimilation – form the lens that can be used to

³ Quotation after NORBERT NEBES, « Ulrich Jasper Seetzen im Jemen », in HANS STEIN, *Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1811). Leben und Werk. Die arabischen Länder und die Nahostforschung im napoleonischen Zeitalter*, Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek, Gotha 1995 (Veröffentlichungen der Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek Gotha, 33), p. 41. All translations are my own, if not otherwise specified.

⁴ Seetzen himself posed as a Muslim when he travelled to areas controlled by Bedouin tribes and because he wanted to visit the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. According to Seetzen, this had been successful: « To get to know the interior of Africa from my own point of view is still as lively and fiery a wish of mine as it was when I made the plan, during which my experience has matured many times over. If I remain alive and healthy, I shall soon, after completing my journey in Arabia, hasten with the greatest expectation towards the goal of my long journey in Africa, in which I hope the mask of Islam will render me as useful a service as it has hitherto rendered me in Arabia » [« Das Innere von Afrika aus eigener Ansicht kennen zu lernen, ist noch ein eben so lebhafter und feuriger Wunsch von mir, wie damals, als ich den Plan fasste, während dem meine Erfahrung vielfach gereift ist. Bleibe ich am Leben und gesund, so werde ich bald nach beendigter Reise in Arabien dem Ziel meiner langen Reise in Afrika mit der größten Erwartung entgegen eilen, wobei mir hoffentlich die Maske des Islam eben so nützliche Dienste leisten wird, als sie mir bisher in Arabien leistete »] (ULRICH JASPER SEETZEN, « Auszug aus einem Schreiben des Russ. Kais. Kammer-Assessors Dr. U. J. Seetzen [1810]. », *Monatliche Correspondenz zur Beförderung der Erd- und Himmels-Kunde*, 28 (1813), p. 238). I thank Natalia Bachour for the reference.

analyse the « excessive storytelling »⁵ in Roes's novel and Seetzen's importance in its construction.

In the novel, it is the Arab audience that adds a seemingly oriental quality to the « excessive storytelling » of the narrator Schnittke – this results, in a sense, in a game of double deception that involves two different Orientalisms. Roes interweaves a wide variety of sources into the historical part of his narrative – they are meticulously listed in the novel appendix (assorted in order of their publication).⁶ The following works are mentioned:

Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East*, Perthes – Möller, Copenhagen – Hamburg 1774.

Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia*, Ducal Publishing House, Weimar 1830.

Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Knight, London 1836.

Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, *Travels through Syria, Palestine, Phenicia, the Trans-Jordan Countries, Arabia Petrae, and Lower Egypt*, Reimer, Berlin 1854.

Charles M. Dougherty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, CUP, Cambridge 1888.

Julius Euting, *Diary of a Journey through Inner Arabia*, Brill, Leiden 1896.

Leo Hirsch, *Travels in South Arabia, Mahra Country and Hadramut*, Brill, Leiden 1897.

Eduard Glaser, *Journey to Marib*, Hölder, Vienna 1913.

Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*, American Geographical Society, New York 1928.

Bertram Thomas, *Arabia Felix. Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia*, Cape, London 1932.

Harry St. J. B. Philby, *The Empty Quarter*, Constable & Company, London 1933.

Thomas E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Cape, London 1936.

⁵ MICHAEL ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali. Leeres Viertel. Invention über das Spiel*, Gatzka, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 438: «Maasslosigkeit des Erzählens».

⁶ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 774. Nevertheless, literary critics complained that Roes's historical text compilation is full of anachronisms, cf. for example ANGELA PRAESENT, « Ein erotischer Tourist im Jemen », *Die Weltwoche*, 9 (01.1997), p. 35.

Seetzen's *Travels through Syria* is mentioned in fourth place, published posthumously in 1854 by the Leipzig private scholar Friedrich Karl Hermann Kruse (1790–1866). This publication was based on the travel observations that Seetzen, who disappeared in 1811, had made from 1805 to 1809. From this point of view, it seems that the timing of Seetzen's writings corresponds most closely with the life of the fictional Oriental traveller Schnittke as opposed to those of Niebuhr (1733–1815) or Burkhardt (1784–1817). Since Roes constructed a competitive relationship between Schnittke and Goethe, which is the reason for Schnittke's departure from Weimar, it must be assumed that the 'Prince of Poets' is somewhat older than the character of the novel. Therefore, Schnittke must have been born between 1748 and 1778 (this means he could be one generation younger than Goethe at most).

As precise as Roes's list of sources may be, he does not disrupt the narrative flow by any footnotes or the like, even though his novel was submitted as a university thesis. Nonetheless, with a little philological patience (and referring to the locations noted in the diaries), the correlations between Seetzen and Schnittke can be identified. For example, Roes uses a detailed quotation from Seetzen when Schnittke writes of his time in Jerusalem. By juxtaposing these two passages in which Seetzen and Schnittke concisely describe their visits to the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, one can see how faithful to the text Roes is in his 'oriental' narrative:

From here I have the pleasure of being able to observe the assembly below me undisturbed for a while. The small grave building is the size of a large room. It forms an elongated square and is covered with copper. The Greeks take the place on one side of the tomb, as well as the main part of the church, the Armenians gather on the other side of the tomb. They are reverent and prudent, while the Greeks behave indecently in the highest degree and make a noise that rings in my ears. The younger ones hustle and wrestle; three or four of them ambush and carry another, whether they like it or not, around the grave, while another crowd is running after them with wild shouts. You don't celebrate a service, you go to a bacchanal.⁷

⁷ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 48: « Von hier habe ich das Vergnügen, die Versammlung unter mir eine Zeitlang ungestört beobachten zu können. Das kleine Grabgebäude hat das Ausmaass eines grossen Zimmers. Es bildet ein längliches Viereck und ist mit Kupfer bedeckt. Die Griechen nehmen den Platz auf der einen Seite des Grabes, desgleichen den Haupttheil der Kirche ein, die Armenier versammeln sich auf der anderen Seite des Grabes. Diese verhalten sich andächtig und besonnen, während sich die Griechen im höchsten Grade unanständig benehmen und ein Lärmen machen, das mir in den Ohren gellt. Die Jüngeren drängen und balgen sich; drey oder vier von ihnen überfallen einen Andern und tragen ihn, mag er wollen oder nicht, um das Grab herum, während ein anderer Haufe ihnen mit wildem Geschrey hinterher rennt. Man feyert keinen Gottesdienst, man begeht ein Bacchanal. »

The whole passage is a more or less precise quotation from Seetzen;⁸ and this is only one of many more or less obvious references to Seetzen's writings in the novel *Empty Quarter*.

Of course, Roes also uses this compiled text procedure for all the authors mentioned, including a whole series of quotations not only from Seetzen but also Niebuhr or Burkhardt. However, the text by Seetzen offers Roes a decisive advantage (compared to numerous other sources used for novel compilation) because he can tap into the diary writer's authorial perspective, which matches that of Schnittke in Roes' text. When looking at this process of text montage on the whole in the novel, moreover, it becomes obvious that the older research reports in the tradition of the Enlightenment are cited at the beginning of the Schnittke text, while more recent accounts appear towards the end.

Correspondingly, Roes not only explores how Schnittke turns from an 'enlightened' Critic of the Orient into an empathetic 'romantic' observer, but also he traces how this process parallels the actual history of Western descriptions of the Orient.⁹ The modern-day narrator currently researching in Yemen, in

⁸ ULRICH JASPER SEETZEN, *Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan-Länder, Arabia Petraea und Unter-Aegypten*, vol. II, ed. Friedrich Kruse, Reimer, Berlin 1854, p. 5: « Von der Gallerie hatte ich das Vergnügen, die Versammlung unten eine Zeitlang ungestört zu beobachten. Das kleine Grabgebäude hat die Grösse eines grossen Zimmers. Es bildet ein länglichtes Viereck, ist mit Kupfer bedeckt, und hat an einem Ende eine kleine Latern-Kuppel. Die Griechen nehmen den Platz auf der einen Seite dieses Grabgebäudes, imgleichen den Haupttheil der Kirche ein, wo sie ihren Gottesdienst verrichten. Die Armenier hatten sich auf der andern Seite des Grabgebäudes versammelt. Diese hielten sich ruhig, die Griechen hingegen betrugten sich im höchsten Grade unanständig und machten einen Lermen, dass mir die Ohren gellten. [...] Die jüngern stiessen und drängten und balgten sich; drey bis vier von ihnen überfielen einen Andern und trugen ihn, er mochte wollen oder nicht, um das Grab herum, während dem ein anderer Haufe ihnen mit wildem Geschrey nachrannte. [...] Es war ein Karneval, und man schien nicht ein christliches Fest, sondern Bacchanalien zu feyern » [« From the gallery, I had the pleasure of observing the gathering below for a while without being disturbed. The small tomb building is the size of a large room. It forms an elongated rectangle, is covered with copper, and has a small lantern dome at one end. The Greeks occupy the space on one side of this tomb, as well as the main part of the church where they worship. The Armenians had gathered on the other side of the tomb. They kept quiet, but the Greeks behaved in the most indecent manner and made a noise that made my ears ring. [...] The younger ones pushed and shoved and fought; three or four of them attacked another and carried him around the tomb, whether he wanted to or not, while another mob ran after them shouting wildly. [...] It was a carnival, and they did not seem to be celebrating a Christian festival, but bacchanalia. »].

⁹ CHRISTOPH SCHMITT-MAAß, « 'mäandernd, ornamentalisch, ohne progression'? Intertextualität in Michael Roes' Freibeutertext *Leeres Viertel* (1996). », *Revista de Filología Alemana*, 15 (2007), p. 95–110; cf. ID., « Ursprünglichkeit, Offenheit, Leere? Zur romantischen Genealogie einer neo-orientalistischen Metapher in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur (Raoul Schrott, Wolfgang Herrndorf, Michael Roes) », in STEFANIE BREMERICH, DIETER BURDORF, ABDALLA ELDIMAGH (eds.), *Orientalismus heute. Perspektiven arabisch-deutscher Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2021, p. 83–107.

contrast, has set himself the task of narrating « meanderingly, ornamentally, without progression »¹⁰ in order to escape what he sees as Orientalist modes of narration. At the same time, this narrator is aware that even this postcolonial positioning is only the most current iteration of what is still a Western representation:

No matter how emphatic, introspective or neutral I behave, all modes of behaviour remain strategic. They aim to make the encounter with the foreign into a controlled, repeatable and verifiable experiment. [...] Even this critique only represents the state of contemporary anthropological reflection.¹¹

Roes therefore allows his historical protagonist to undergo a transformation instead of making a historical example of unreflective Orientalism in this doppelgänger figure: Schnittke thus undergoes a transformation from Orientalist to critic of Orientalism.

Moreover, both protagonists (the historical more so than the contemporary one) adapt to the host culture, and even become absorbed in it:

On the other hand, my intention was to present all events only quite clearly and without ornamental or boastful style. Now, however, it seems to me that a pure, artless language is just as little possible as a pure and perfect view: we always look from a certain point of view; and we can never see the whole from a certain point of view. It is the same with our speech: every word is a choice, since there is no direct and absolute connection between the events and their description. I listen to myself with reverent silence. And the more I have to recognise the dubiousness of all objectivity, the more the embellishing and ironising style seems to me the only way to escape the lie [...].¹²

The essential difference between ‘Roes’ and Schnittke is that the researcher currently in Yemen has already resigned himself to this position, whereas

¹⁰ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 58: « määndernd, ornamentalisch, ohne progression ».

¹¹ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 224: « Wie emphatisch, introspektiv oder neutral ich mich auch immer verhalte, alle verhaltensweisen bleiben strategisch. Sie zielen darauf ab, die begegnung mit dem fremden zu einem kontrollierten, wiederhol- und überprüfbaren experiment zu machen. [...] Selbst diese kritik repräsentiert nur den stand der gegenwärtigen anthropologischen reflexion. »

¹² ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 512: « Hingegen war meine Absicht, alle Vorkommnisse nur recht deutlich und ohne schmückenden oder prahlerischen Stil darzustellen. Nun aber scheint mir eine reine, kunstlose Sprache ebenso wenig möglich wie eine reine und vollkommene Ansicht: Immer blicken wir von einem bestimmten Standpunkte; und nie können wir von einem bestimmten Standpunkte alleyn das Ganze überblicken. So ist es auch mit unserer Rede: Jedes Worth ist eine Wahl, da es keinen unmittelbaren und absoluten Zusammenhang zwischen den Vorkommnissen und ihrer Beschreibung giebt. Mit andächtigem Schweigen höre ich mir selber zu. Und je mehr ich die Fragwürdigkeit jeder Objectivität erkennen muss, um so mehr scheint mir gerade der ausschmückende und ironisierende Stil die einzige Möglichkeit, der Lüge zu entgehen [...]. »

Schnittke only resigns himself to his « own cultural competence »¹³ in the course of the journey. Both feel alienated in their homeland and take flight into a foreign land. While the present-day researcher attempts to approach Yemeni culture reflectively, Schnittke's focus is on the fascinated experience of the foreign, without, however, falling prey to orientalism. One could also say that while Roes reflects the foreign, Schnittke falls into it. This then explains the fact that Schnittke is ultimately absorbed by Arab culture, while the contemporary ethnographer, after being absorbed by this culture, retreats to his own terrain (i.e., writing). In their respective different concepts of what is foreign, there is hesitation and the staging of a rupture.¹⁴ Here, Roes skilfully uses the Schnittke narrative strand to critically reflect on handed-down Orientalisms. In its essayistic form – which Roes takes over from Seetzen – the diary format allows for a window into the documentation of other voices, but also it creates a space for the revision of statements and even statements that have already been made. For Roes, objectivity does not mean the collection of what is understood as reality, but the disclosure of discourse and the resulting forms of redescription and renegotiation.¹⁵ In the face of the death of his friend and leader as well as his own abduction into the Yemeni desert, the author's only concern is his own diary.¹⁶ Although fixated on the Western tradition, he also proves to be open to listening to other perspectives and even engaging in critical self-reflection to the point of silence. The presence of the fictional character of Schnittke (Seetzen's 'double') is thus – beyond the external coincidences (such as travel route, fragmentary, quotations, assimilation into Islamic culture) – imperative for the novel as a whole. On the one hand, it is narratively significant because it makes the novel *Empty Quarter* vivid and readable; on the other hand, it adds reflexivity because the introduction and refraction of Orientalisms (taken from historical travelogues and processed in a historically progressive way in the novel) allows for an almost playful reflection on traditional Orientalisms without having to 'overcome' them.

In sum, Michael Roes achieves five objections by drawing on historical narrative fragments:

- 1) He can re-enact the « excessive storytelling » linked to the Age of Enlightenment and the Romantic era but add a postmodern twist.
- 2) He does not have to invent historical narrative parts, but assembles historical descriptions of the Orient into a new text.

¹³ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 225.

¹⁴ SCHMITT-MAAß, *Das gefährdete Subjekt*, p. 257.

¹⁵ SCHMITT-MAAß, *Das gefährdete Subjekt*, p. 263.

¹⁶ ROES, *Rub' Al-Khali*, p. 499.

- 3) He can use these traditional elements to create reflections of postmodern positions on orientalism and exoticism. In this way, the historical story of the Orient (as a story *from* the Orient) itself becomes something other in the postmodern text that does not have to be appropriated, but can stand for itself.
- 4) Moreover, the reflexive, detached (and sometimes disenchanted or cynic) postmodern storyteller finds his counterpart (or companion) in the curious, eagerly (and sometimes naive) 'hero' of the nineteenth century plot (Schnittke resp. Seetzen).
- 5) He can also provide insight into the fragmentary nature of any ethnographic fieldwork, be it historical or present. This insight is marked in the increasing crypticism of the historical narrator's diary entries; for the postmodern narrator, on the other hand, reflection on the past and present of ethnographic research becomes more prevalent.

Of course, the historical narrative figure Schnittke is not to be read as a true-to-scale translation of the real Ulrich Jasper Seetzen. Rather, Roes has employed a distinct postmodern narrative process that relies on individual and unrelated stories instead of designing the *grand récit* of history. It is therefore not contradictory, but rather only logical that the historical narrator Schnittke comes to conclusions that were discussed in the so-called Writing Culture debate of postmodern ethnology. In order to satisfy the fascination of Arabic listeners, Schnittke had to repeat these 'fantastic adventures' over and over again in an act of « excessive storytelling ».

In other words, the postmodern and anti-orientalist reflexivity of the ethnographic parts of the novel are offset by the integration of modern, sometimes also Orientalistic, set pieces of real historical descriptions of the Orient that allow for narrative filling or saturation. The novel thus heeds the call of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who developed a concept of culture as a network of a 'self-woven cultural webs' by drawing on the work of Max Weber. Geertz noted that, in terms of the postmodern ethnography of Writing Culture, « What is needed, or anyway must serve, is tableaux, anecdotes, parables, tales: mini-narratives with the narrator in them. »¹⁷

It is precisely this art of storytelling that also characterizes the posthumously edited diaries of Seetzen: he records stories from third parties, breaks off to insert an anecdote, proverbs, sketches, or other notes. Ultimately, it is the biographical parallels and the diaristic writing processes that make Seetzen a – if you will –

¹⁷ CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *After the Fact. Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. – London 1995, p. 65.

« go-between »¹⁸ among cultures and thus a forerunner of postmodern ethnography. By not only quoting Seetzen (as other ethnographers), but also imitating in a part of the plot Seetzen's life and style through his protagonist Schnittke, Roes thus highlights these postmodern qualities in a quite modern text.

We first illustrate that the traditional stylistic approach to Aristoteles Latinus translations, as initiated and developed by Lorenzo Minio-Paluello and Fernand Bossier, shows an unacknowledged close connection with contemporary practices in authorship attribution studies – the work produced by those precursors was an invaluable basis for the design of our own computational method. After justifying the criteria governing the compilation of our corpus, and the origin and processing of the source texts, we explain the technical background of our stylometric methodology. Finally, the results of our investigation reveal some limitations and difficulties that will need further research and refinement.

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¹⁸ SIMON SCHAFFER et al., « Introduction », in SIMON SCHAFFER et al. (eds.), *The Brokered World. Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820*, Science History Publications, Sagamore Beach, Mass. 2009 (Uppsala Studies in History of Science, 35), p. ix.

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