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Julian Barnes – a cosmopolitan author

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This paper presents aspects of the work of Julian Barnes from a contemporary cultural perspective, meant to discuss the British writer's response to the dissolution of meaning in contemporary society. Cosmopolitanism and a critical view towards simulacra are two attitudes that may define a meaningful life, in Barnes's view. In the novel "England, England" we find challenges to conventions of the novel as a genre, and a discussion of the human costs of the "society as spectacle". Therefore, the insidious processes of transformation of meaning are exposed by the British writer in "England, England".

Key words*: cosmopolitanism, simulacra, communication, mechanisms, mirroring, identity*

1. Introduction

The present paper argues that the British writer Julian Barnes reflects upon the mechanisms that generate meaning in literature and in contemporary culture. Facing the degradation of cultural meanings in the Western consumer society, Julian Barnes exposes the dangers of this process and suggests that knowing another culture generates meaning and gives a new perspective on reality.

At the beginning, I present the concept of 'cosmopolitanism', that explains the contemporary desire to surpass the limitations of the individual's context of origin. Another aspect of contemporary society is very well defined by Jean Baudrillard – simulation, simulacra and change. Baudrillard explains the changes in human communication in contemporary society: the relationships become functional, pragmatic, sometimes temporary, without any concern for the other. The French philosopher's view of the "society of the spectacle" is to be seen reflected in Julian Barnes's work. Therefore, my next focus is to briefly present Julian Barnes's novel *England, England*. In this novel Barnes comments indirectly on the seductive power of illusion, on the fascination of the replica, which replaces the original. Then, I discuss the relation between narrative and history. According to Hayden White, narrative is not the essence of the historical discourse. On the other hand, narrative is essential for understanding the mechanisms of the novel as a genre, and this is why I discuss briefly this theoretical aspect. Also, Julian Barnes himself meditates on the

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status of the novel, in his work. Further on, Julian Barnes's interest for France, French culture and French literature can be discussed under the heading "fascination for the Other".

The last part of the paper offers another theoretical perspective - Mark Currie's considerations on the relation between globalization, change in contemporary society and looking for the construction of new meanings.

2. Cosmopolitanism

In *Eloge du Cosmopolitisme* Guy Scarpetta gives a definition of cosmopolitanism, a concept that is useful in the discussion of attitudes towards the world characterizing postmodern writers, such as Julian Barnes. As Guy Scarpetta points out:

> Cosmopolitanism is the movement that drives any subject to free himself/herself from "roots", from his/her ties with community and, at the same time, to try freely other connections, other forms of re-grouping, ignoring or transcending "the limits" of belonging.(…) Liberation from the former groupings, autonomy, de-compartimentalizing, re-confrontation, disjunctive ensembles and transcending the limits. (my translation) (Scarpetta 1997, 230)

Guy Scarpetta's definition of cosmopolitanism refers to the contemporary individual who looks for an adequate self expression in today's world. The individual does not feel that the standard social and cultural forms express him/her nowadays, the commercial state of culture and the presence of the media create a state of alienation and depersonalization. As a result, the individual looks for alternative ways of being in the world, in an authentic way. Human beings have always needed meaning in their lives, a sense of coherent evolution. If the outer world and the inner world collide, the individual has to create another context for himself/herself. Such a new context, a new expression is given by cosmopolitanism, which means, in a way, expanding one's horizon, finding new ties, new connections, "transcending the limits of belonging", as Scarpetta puts it.

The definition given by the theoretician is very thorough, expressing all the nuances and aspects of this cultural movement, this attitude – cosmopolitanism:

> Cosmopolitanism (…) is the contrary to a pure denial of all belongings. (…) It presupposes identity, unity, language, law, belonging (…). Cosmopolitanism implies therefore an anamnesis (…) of "roots", of genealogies, to determine the explosion of all subordinations, all common measures. It is not just floating, a wandering without significance, but it is multiplying the meaning through calculated trajectories. (…) And because it involves "meaning" (and

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> even **more meaning** than the majority of community discourses) it (…) can be understood in socializing, it opposes political discourses the dismantling of community illusions, the consequences of social connections and the irreducible character of the subject concerning all the collective forces. (my translation) (Scarpetta 1997, 266).

Thus, this contemporary attitude – cosmopolitanism – gives coherence and unity to the human being, not chaos and death. It relates to the fundamentals of meaningful human life: identity, unity, language, law. In my opinion it is a response, a healthy response, to the challenges of contemporary society. It offers a sound solution to the pressures of contemporary society, and it is a response that constructs, adds value in society, it is not demolishing, negative. The individual constructs his/her life in a conscious manner, using all the possibilities of modern life – the easiness of traveling, for example.

Actually, Susan Sontag, in *Against Interpretation*, refers to the new experiences of modern life, which are: extreme social and physical mobility, the crowdedness of the human scene (life in cities), the availability of new sensations such as physical speed – in traveling, or speed of images – in the visual arts.
These experiences make it possible for the individual not to be dependent, as in the past, on the familiar environment, the family of origin, the traditional ways of making a living. And this independence makes it possible, for those who want to explore possibilities in life, to be cosmopolitan, to choose not to be determined all the time by the context of origin.

As Guy Scarpetta points out, the individual's need for meaning in his/her life is one of the reasons for choosing this attitude. The subject has to fight for his/her autonomy, in the contemporary context of the 'tyranny of the object', in Jean Baudrillard's words.

3. Simulation and change

As a matter of fact, Jean Baudrillard explains many contemporary aspects of alienation and simulation in his book *Les Strategies Fatales*.

One important aspect of Julian Barnes's work refers to the presentation, in a narrative and novelistic manner, of contemporary human relationships, and the transformations they undergo. The lack of substance, the lack of communication, psychological confusion, difficulty in making commitments – these are only a few problems that Julian Barnes investigates in his novels, for example in *Talking It Over*, *Love etc*, *A History of the World in 10 and ½ Chapters*.

Jean Baudrillard describes the changes that occur in relationships in contemporary society, from a sociological and cultural perspective. The essence of human communication is transformed:

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> "Where is the other, from now on, with whom you can negociate what is left from freedom and sovereignty, with whom you can play the game of subjectivity and alienation, with whom you can negociate your own image in the mirror?" (my translation). (…) This is what disappeared, this good old alterity of relationship, this good old involvement of the subject in the contract, in the rational exchange that brings profit and hope, at the same time. All this is replaced by a state of exception, a pointless speculation (…). Taking hostages is part of this type of speculations – ephemeral, pointless, instantaneous." (my translation) (Baudrillard 1996, 57).

Jean Baudrillard clearly explains the difference between a human link, an exchange of information, or emotions, and contemporary communication – that is schematic, instantaneous, aggressive on many occasions. Alvin Toffler, in his famous *Future Shock*, discusses these aspects as well. The consequences for all this is "a loss of substance, of value and of meaning", people live in a "state of controlled simulation." (my translation) (Baudrillard 1996, 86).

Another aspect investigated by Baudrillard is the change in the relation subject – object. In traditional societies the subject had supremacy over the object. In the contemporary, postmodern society, set on the principles of consumerism and market efficiency, the object gains power. As Baudrillard says, "The metamorphoses, strategies of the object surpass the understanding of the subject. The object is not the double, nor the reflection of the subject, but it has its own strategy, it has a rule of game that is impenetrable for the subject, because it is infinitely ironical." (my translation) (Baudrillard 1996, 203).

Jean Baudrillard is categorical, and he describes the magnitude, the depth of changes that occur in the post-industrialist society, which he refers to as "the world as spectacle." The meaning of culture itself is scrutinized and discussed by Barnes from this perspective of the view of "the world as spectacle".

4. A cultural project

This vision is revealed in Julian Barnes's *England, England*. In this novel, the writer makes a satire of contemporary Britain and the late capitalist society in general. He comments on the degree in which tradition, fallen in the area of entertainment, has become an industry, a "spectacle'. Barnes comments indirectly on the seductive power of illusion, on the fascination of the replica, which replaces the original. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra is related to **transference of meaning**, because the original meaning of a famous painting, for example, is transferred to a copy in a magazine, or to a poster.

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England, England is constructed around a farse, a Project of tycoon Sir Jack Pitman, who plans and succeeds to create a replica *in nuce* of Britain itself, on the Isle of Wight. *England, England* is a project of the tourist industry of the third millennium, that concentrates all representative touristic attractions of England, offered to the Japanese or American tourist, eager to consume the maximum quantity of British history, art and culture in the least amount of time. There is a character in the novel, a French intellectual, a caricature of Jacques Derrida, who 'explains' the principles that are behind Sir Jack's project to the other members of the team:

> … we are talking of something profoundly modern. It is well established (…) that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself, the perfect sound and solitude of the compact disc to the symphony concert in the company of thousand victims of throat complaints, the book on tape to the book on the lap. (Barnes 1998, 53).

Jack Pitman's team ruthlessly speculate on the tourist's desire to have a good time on holiday, to feel better, to feel less ignorant about Britain's historical sights, monuments or works of art. Barnes decomposes and exposes the mechanisms of manipulation, the insidious modes and bodies of power and, at the same time, the capacity of the manipulator to enthrall and mesmerize. The tourist is, in the dark vision of Sir Jack Pitman, a victim of his exploitation, who craves for the illusion of magic: "We want our visitors to feel that they have passed through a mirror, that they have left their own worlds and entered a new one, different yet strangely familiar." (Barnes 1998, 120). The late capitalist world of cultural saturation is questioned, provoked and hopefully challenged by Barnes's reflection. In Barnes's view, human identity seems to have little chance for authenticity – see the destiny of Martha Cochrane, one of Sir Jack's employees, a woman with no private life, no depth of human responsiveness.

The second part of the novel presents the project in full swing, in fact the reproduction of the main touristic attractions of England on the Isle of Wight that becomes England, England. The real England is referred to as Old England, and it decays economically and spiritually to the stage of a rural community. Martha Cochrane, whose destiny can be the subject of a separate discussion, plays an active role at the beginning, but is herself 'swallowed' by the project, and discovers that behind the mask there remains nothing – no emotion, no authentic feeling. As the readers foresee, the whole construction on the Isle of Wight is grotesque, and the experiment – begun as a joke – turns into the representation of a megalomaniac, with the King as a merely decorative figure, the controlled press, and a bunch of repressed merry men of Robin Hood. Actually, Barnes provokes the reader to reflect on the cost of this gargantuan production, the cost of this society of spectacle. What

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do the human beings become? What happens to the relationships between humans? What is left of the old-fashioned humanity?

A postmodern novel, *England, England* can be discussed as belonging to a paradigm of writings that challenge the conventions of the novel as a genre. Barnes constructs a dystopia, and he places the action in a not too distant future, but still a future.

5. A theoretical perspective on historicity and narrative

A theoretical excursion is needed on this topic, as the structuring of the novel as a genre, through narrative, is a vehicle for communicating the writer's way of constructing meaning. In a study published in the anthology *Metafiction*, edited and introduced by Mark Currie (Longman, 1995), entitled "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", Hayden White views the relation between history and narrative as a mode of representation. In recent decades the co-implication of narrative and historical theory has been the subject of rigorous thought. Hayden White discusses the recent influence of narrative theory on historical theory in different areas of humanities: Anglo-American analytical philosophers, socially scientific historians, semiologically oriented literary theorists and hermeneutic philosophers. In Hayden White's view, history is a kind of explanation of human actions and it has an epistemic status, while narrative is a way of representation, a consciousness of time. For Hayden White, the relation between history and narrative seems to be one of subordination, history being the 'strong' term, and narrative being the subordinate one.

The historian begins with an assessment of nineteenth-century historical theory, the way history was conceived:

> The historian's dissertation was an interpretation of what he took to be the true story, while his narration was a representation of what he took to be the real story. (…) But this nineteenth-century view of the nature and function of narrative in historical discourse was based on an ambiguity. On the one hand, the narrative was regarded as only a form of discourse, a form which featured the story as its content. On the other hand, this form was itself a content insofar as historical events were conceived to manifest themselves in reality as elements and aspects of stories. (H. White, in M. Currie 1998, 106-107)

Hayden White comments on this drastic view of the *Annalistes* on narrative that it must be included in the analysis and deconstruction of narrativity that was carried out in the 1960s by structuralists and post-structuralists, who claimed to demonstrate that narrative was not only "an instrument of ideology, but the very paradigm of ideologizing discourse in general."

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The exposition of the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation is done, from a different perspective, of semiologically oriented literary theory, by Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, shows Hayden White. The researcher makes reference to Barthes's essay "The Discourse of History" (1967). Here Barthes challenged the distinction, basic to historicism in all its forms, between 'historical' and 'fictional' discourse. The point of attack, shows White, was the kind of historiography that favored a narrative representation of past events and processes. Barthes's main aim was to attack the "vaunted objectivity of traditional historiography", by exposing the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation with which it has been associated. To continue White's exposition of Barthes's views, for the latter, narrative was, "following Lacan, the principal instrumentality by which society fashions the narcissistic, infantile consciousness into a 'subjectivity' capable of bearing the 'responsibilities' of an 'object' of the law in all its forms." (Barthes 1967, 114)

Humans need the narrative mode of representation to give order and coherence to their experiences. At the end of "The Discourse of History", Barthes stresses that "in objective history, the real is never more than an unformulated signified, sheltering behind the apparently all-powerful referent." Hayden White stresses that narrative is not the essence of the historical discourse: "the narrative form of the discourse is only a medium for the message, having no more truth-value or informational content than any other formal structure, such as a logical syllogism, a metaphorical figure, or a mathematical equation." (Barthes 1967, 118). For the historian, it is clear that the narrative is a way of carrying the significance of the historical discourse.

Another aspect concerning meaning and transference of meaning in Barnes's work is the British writer's fascination with a foreign culture, language and literature. In this case, meaning is generated through a process of mirroring, defining one's identity by coming in contact with "the Other", culturally speaking.

6. Julian Barnes and France

In the collection of essays *Something to Declare*, published in 2002 by Picador, Barnes explains in detail his passion for France. The entire volume is dedicated to Barnes's encounter with France, from concrete details – that interest, fascinate and intrigue him at the same time – to French language and literature, and even literary gossip. The acquaintance with France started in his pre-adolescence, as he used to go with his family in motoring holidays, and visited castles, churches, museums and grottoes. France is not "an imaginary homeland", as Salman Rushdie would say, but for Barnes, it is the Other, the exotic, though not very distant land, that he needs to know in order to define his own identity. Barnes's interest in the French culture, starting from food – "the formidable eccentricity of the food", rural architecture,

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film and song, the Tour de France, to philosophy and literature, has been the subject of many interviews, so his preface to *Something to Declare* seems to be a condensed and elaborated answer to the big question: Why the constant and deep interest in France?

The writer even quotes, in a humorous manner, or mocks the interview style, explaining his 'elective affinities' with the country of Corneille and Camus:

> Where does your love of France come from, Monsieur Barnes? Oh, I reply, both my parents taught French; I went to France with them on holiday; I read French at school and university; I taught a year at a Catholic school in Rennes (where my gastronomic conservatism was unpicked); my favourite writer is Flaubert; many of my intellectual reference points are French; and so on. (Barnes 2002, xii)

Barnes sees France, in his mature years, with the eyes of the novelist: interested in the small things, even the most apparently insignificant details say something to the forensic eye of Julian Barnes: "quiet working villages with rusting café tables, lunchtime torpor, pollarded plane-trees, the dusty thud of boules and an all-purpose *epicerie*; here a house-wall still bears a faded DUBO, DUBON, DUBONNET and a war memorial lists the brutal necropolis of 1914-18." (Barnes 2002, xiii).

The acute observation of detail is integrated in the larger picture, and, apart from that, the self-reflexive nature of Julian Barnes is obvious in his awareness of his subjective account of his French experience:

> Is my view of France partial? Certainly. Knowing a second country means choosing what you want from it, finding antithesis to your normal, English, urban life (…) My partial France is provincial in topography and contrarian in spirit, a France of the regions rather than the centre, of Jose Bove rather than sleek-suited Eurocrat (…) The cultural period I am constantly drawn back to is roughly 1850-1925, from the culmination of Realism to the fission of Modernism: a wondrous stretch not just for French culture but also for French cultural hospitality. (Barnes 2002, xiv)

This cultural period obviously includes the work of Gustave Flaubert, Barnes's favourite writer, and, as he says, also his literary model. The second part of the book is dedicated entirely to Flaubert: his detailed biography, 'the case of Louis Colet', Flaubert's *Correspondance*, the exchanges between Flaubert and Turgenev, the discussion of a film made after *Madame Bovary*.

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6. The fascination for the Other

Julian Barnes's exploration of the French cultural space is due to the fascination he has for the Other: "…the French are so …well, French, and therefore designed by God to seem as provokingly dissimilar from the British as possible." (Barnes 2002, xv). The provocation is, first of all, intellectual, for Barnes. The richness of French culture gives Barnes the incentive for meditation, for the rational process of thinking:

> "Central for me in the development of the modern sensibility is the figure of Gustave Flaubert. (…) Flaubert, the writer par excellence, the saint and martyr of literature, the perfector of realism, the creator of the modern novel with *Madame Bovary*." (Barnes 2002, xiv).

The thorough investigation of Flaubert's work and personality, the detailed account of the Tour de France 1907, for example, are the result of an enquiring mind that seeks to define its own identity, knowing that this can fully be done only by the encounter with the Other, even if the Other is appropriated, through thorough knowledge. The issues of European identity, national specificity are, of course, dealt with in the Preface, in a light-hearted tone:

> "I may and do seem very British to a French interlocutor, and s/he thoroughly French to me. But I am less British than my father, and he less than my grandfather. So what, Monsieur Barnes? Your grandfather, you tell me, went abroad only once in his life, to France for the First World War; your father was engaged in the second. Surely a bit of globalization and European homogenization is a small price to pay for the fact that you managed to dodge the third? Isn't the last half-century of European peace something to celebrate?" (Barnes 2002, xvi)

In the discourses of postcolonialism, for example, the other and the self are seen in a position of hierarchy, of subordination, so that the self is the dominant and the other (the colonized, woman or child) the subordinate. This binary logic leads to discrimination, exploitation and many types of complexes.
However, as far as Julian Barnes is concerned, it is rather the case of a process of mirroring – mirroring the other in the self, discovering the self in the other, identifying the self through the other.

The collection of short stories *Cross Channel*, published in 1996, is the result of Barnes's fascination with France, his European spirit and expression of a new type of statiality. Professor Pia Brinzeu referred to this collection of short stories in the context of the writings of British authors who go beyond cultural stereotypes in

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their adventures of re-discovering Europe and the world at large, in the postcolonial era (in *Corridors of Mirrors,* 1997).

Meeting with the Other definitely generates meaning for the British writer. Julian Barnes's *Cross Channel* comprises short stories about Englishmen who live in England, but travel frequently to France. The topos of traveling is actually the element that unites the otherwise apparently unconnected short stories: "Interference", "Junction", "Experiment", "Melon", "Evermore".

The first short story, "Interference", placed in the first decades of the 20th century, is the story of a French-English couple, symbolizing the love-hate relationship between the two nations. The relation between the French Adeline and the English composer Leonard Verity is permanently tense because of the composer's huge creative ego. Barnes's sharp sense of observation and psychological annotation is at his best in this short piece. The free indirect speech is used by Barnes to allow the composer to speak for himself:

> Pedantically, he had explained once more. He was an artist, did she not see? He was not an exile, since that implied a country to which he could, or would, return. Nor was he an immigrant, since that implied a desire to be accepted, to submit yourself to the land of adoption. But you did not leave one country, with its social forms and rules, in order to burden yourself with the parallel forms and rules of another country. No, he was an artist. (Barnes 1996, 8).

Julian Barnes creates images and characters that go beyond the stereotype, showing that the intersection with another culture generates meaning, gives a new perspective on reality, or offers the subject the environment desired. Barnes manages to re-create different historical moments with the atmosphere associated to them: for instance, the French Revolution, with its festive and cruel mood – in the short story "Melon", or the First World War and the depressive, mourning state of mind associated with it – in the short story "Evermore".

Julian Barnes is essayistic and reflexive, he is not concerned with rigorous borrowings from French culture, or with metonymical relations between culture and society.

7. Theoretical perspective

In his book *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie describes the relationship of narrative to identity and the role of time in experience, in contemporary culture. As is well known, the concept of globalization charts the changes in the cultural phenomenon at large. As Mark Currie puts it,

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> …the theme of globalization, as a key area of cultural change, suggests that it is not only history which has compressed but geography. Traditionally travel may broaden the mind, but it also compresses the globe in the sense that, at jet speed, the temporal gap between places is reduced to a co-presence, encouraging us to think of the planet as a simultaneous unity, an effect obviously enforced by the simultaneity of other, electronic forms of communication." (Currie 1998, 104).

The compression of geography and time is dealt with in *England, England* by Julian Barnes. The processes of compression and identity re-construction are presented in an imaginative way by the British author. The construction of meaning is challenged deeply by the commodification of contemporary culture, in the context of post-industrial society that is oriented only towards profit. An **abundance of signs without significance** is another theme explored by Barnes in his novels. These insidious processes of transformation of meaning are exposed by the British writer in the novel *England, England*. At the same time, Barnes expresses the eternally human wish for meaning and true relationships, in his novels *Talking It Over* and *Love, Etc*.

Coming back to Mark Currie's explanations, "this new commodified and cosmopolitan sense of identity" is a form of "compressed tourism".

> According to this view, globalization is divided between processes taking place at home and abroad, both of which amount to an increased experience of other cultures. (…) it is hard to think of a more striking example of the transformation of narrative depth into surface images than the shorthand cultural signs of the tourist industry. (Currie 1998, 105).

8. Conclusion

This paper dealt first of all with the concept of cosmopolitanism, seen both as an attitude and a tendency. Thus, this contemporary attitude – cosmopolitanism – gives coherence and unity to the human being, not chaos and death. It relates to the fundamentals of meaningful human life: identity, unity, language, law. In my opinion it is a response to the challenges of contemporary society. It offers a sound solution to the pressures of contemporary society, and it is a response that constructs, adds value in society.

One important aspect of Julian Barnes's work refers to the presentation, in a narrative and novelistic manner, of contemporary human relationships, and the transformations they undergo. The lack of substance, the lack of communication, psychological confusion, difficulty in making commitments – these are only a few aspects that Julian Barnes investigates in his novels, for example in *Talking It Over*, *Love etc*, *A History of theWorld in 10 and ½ Chapters.* Barnes comments indirectly

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on the seductive power of illusion, on the fascination of the replica, which replaces the original. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra is related to **transference of meaning**, because the original meaning of a famous painting, for example, is transferred to a copy in a magazine, or as a poster.

Julian Barnes's exploration of the French cultural space is due to the fascination he has for the Other. The provocation is, first of all, intellectual, for Barnes. The richness of French culture gives Barnes the incentive for meditation, for the rational process of thinking. Also, the relation between self and other is rather the case of a process of mirroring – mirroring the other in the self, discovering the self in the other, identifying the self through the other.

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All in all, the conclusion would be that Julian Barnes opposes the commodification of signs in contemporary culture to a cosmopolitan attitude, he addresses nowadays problems – alienation, loss of meaning – in the manner of intercultural dialogue that adds meaning to the world, instead of depriving the world of it.

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