

(Excerpts from)

TOWARD STRENGTHENING A SENSE OF LITERARY COMMUNITY

by

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As authors, publishers, and readers of serious literature, we believe in its importance. Consequently, it seems to me that we should see the importance of acknowledging that all is not well with American literary culture, and of moving with imagination, determination, and dispatch to explore ways whereby the current state of affairs can be changed for the better. Such action will serve not only our own self-interest, but — to the extent we're successful — will also provide, through its "affirming flame," productive illumination for the diverse and disparate populations that constitute the complex tapestry we call "American society." I offer this essay as a contribution to what I hope will be a continuing dialogue regarding what actions might be taken, and in that spirit I will make some specific recommendations. But first, a look at where we are.

A superficial glance would perhaps suggest that American literary culture is vigorous and thriving. Each year, thousands of literary works are published by the large houses and the more than four thousand little magazines and small presses that blanket the nation. There are more literary authors than ever before, more Creative Writing programs in universities, more independent workshops, seminars, and local writers' groups, more grants and prizes awarded by public and private agencies. Technological advances in cheap offset printing and desk-top computers have put the means of publication into the hands of anyone with physical and financial access to them. Literature

continues to be taught in high school and college classrooms, and there is heavy use of public libraries. There are increasing numbers of service organizations for writers and publishers, such as COSMEP, CLMP, Poets & Writers, Inc., and IWI, to name just a few. Each year sees hundreds of literary book reviews in mainstream newspapers, mass circulation magazines, and the small press, with a few publications, such as *The Small Press Review* and *The American Book Review*, specializing in small-press titles. Even mainstream organs such as *The New York Times* have newly begun to review small-press publications. Vigorous and thriving, one might say — as never before.

But more careful scrutiny reveals disturbing evidence that all is *not* well. Recent studies have estimated that one out of five American adults is functionally illiterate. Of those who do read, proportionally fewer are reading serious literature than was the case forty years ago. Of the books purchased in America, the vast majority are non-fictional works; of fictional works, the vast majority are genre fiction — romances, mysteries, westerns, horror tales, glorified soap operas. (I realize that genre fiction has always been popular, and I don't wish to deprecate it; my point is, that in a shrinking pool of readers and purchasers of fiction, proportionally fewer are reading and purchasing works which aspire to greater complexity and subtlety than genre fiction typically attempts. Readers and purchasers of poetry are fewer still.) Young people read what is assigned in school classrooms, perhaps, but what beyond? From surveying my undergraduate students at Illinois State University over many years, I find that the readers claim to enjoy romances, thrillers, horror novels, and fantasy, with a few mentioning Hemingway, Pynchon, and Vonnegut — but almost none claims to read poetry, and most admit to having read very little of anything during their teen years. How is reading to compete with such diversions as dating, sports, the shopping mall, video games, and MTV?

And graver yet: the last ten years have seen an alarming rise in censorship as special interest groups throughout the nation have moved to ban both literary classics and contemporary fiction

from school curricula and public libraries. The American Library Association reports 1,000 instances of book-challenge or banning during the last calendar year. The politically expedient outcry in Congress against obscenity reverberates in the National Endowment for the Arts through non-funding of artists and exhibits deemed immoral and thus unsuitable to receive taxpayers' dollars¹, and through the NEA's newly enacted ruling that requires recipients of literary grants to sign a pledge that they will not publish matter which "may be considered obscene."²¹ *The Paris Review* and several other magazines have set a commendable example by turning down their grants in protest of this policy.³ Active censorship in whatever form has a chilling effect on authors' freedom of expression — the ultimate chill being authors' attempts to "please" the censors by censoring themselves.

Another straw in this ill wind presages a different kind of censorship —that which occurs when large publishers, mainstream review media, and chain booksellers — through their decisions regarding what to publish, review, and stock — limit public access to particular works. In largehouse commercial publishing, mergers and conglomerations during the last twenty years have concentrated trade and textbook publishing into fewer and fewer hands.⁴ As publishing firms (and newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations) have been subsumed by multinational media empires or made subsidiaries of megacorporations not primarily concerned with publishing, cost-accounting has become the chief criterion determining not only size of print-runs and quality of physical production, but also which books are to be published and promoted: the difference in this mindset from what has traditionally obtained in the industry is that the newstyle thinking increasingly sees books as consumable commodities (like toothpaste or toaster ovens) whose sole claim on life is their ability to turn a profit. The large chain bookstores such as B. Dalton, Waldenbooks, and Doubleday, which collectively account for 60–70% of all trade books sold in America, with their many hundreds of outlets in shopping malls, see books as commodities also. Needing to

maximize profits, they cannot afford to stock their expensive shelf-space with slow-moving, limited-audience titles. Since the chains bulk-order thousands of copies of current books which they think will sell, it's to the advantage of the publishing conglomerates to publish the kinds of books they want — and thus a cozy symbiotic relationship has developed which effectively eliminates from lists and inventories certain types of works which would appear not to serve their respective (and mutual) ends.

Further, as largescale publishing conglomerates monopolize mass-production of books, and the power to decide is vested in fewer and fewer hands, it will be increasingly likely that innovative, experimental, limited-audience works (including poetry), and those by new authors with unproved sales records, will not be published by these firms at all. Indeed, they already seem to be content to let the little magazines, small and university presses assume the task of publishing these works; and fortunately the university and small presses have expanded and diversified to perform this role. But there is every likelihood that as bighouse publishing increasingly serves the ends of megacorporations (and their policy-makers and stockholders), the concentration of power will make possible the suppression of largescale production and distribution of any work which seems too controversial, or which suggests or promotes conceptions and values deemed to be contrary to the corporations' policies, ideologies, and interests.

Already, "dissenting" opinions are systematically excluded from the op-ed pages of chain newspapers; the wrong kinds of books don't get reviewed (i.e., are not given notice and brought to the public's attention); the large corporations are deleting selected lists from their subsidiaries. A case in point: Pantheon Press, a subsidiary of Random House (itself a recent acquisition of S.I. and Donald Newhouse's Advance Publications), which since 1942 had published controversial, socially progressive, and unusual works, has come under the axe. In February, Andre Schiffrin, the head of Pantheon, "resigned" rather than acquiesce in cutting back Pantheon's list. Claiming that they had learned

that the new chairman of Random House intends to cut the list by two-thirds, and cut staff to match, four senior editors, following Schiffrin, resigned in protest, issuing an eloquent statement as they left.⁵ Straws in the wind. I think it likely that certain types of literary works will simply not be available from large houses and chain-bookstore outlets, and that in order to be published and distributed by these powerful organizations, numerous authors may increasingly fashion their works to “fit” the desired profile — thus, in effect, censoring themselves.

The publication of serious literature — of poetry, of innovative and experimental fiction — of those works which at the present time do not have large sales and which, indeed, may take years to find their audience, will increasingly be the task of little magazines and small presses. It’s here where people are found who are passionately committed to literary writing and to making it available, who are opposed to regarding literary works as commodities for consumption, who are convinced of literature’s intrinsic importance. Unfortunately, unless they are subsidized by universities, grants, or generous patrons, most little magazines and small presses do not have the money to print thousands of copies, to promote and advertise their works in mass-circulation media, or to forge comprehensive distribution networks. Until very recently, mainstream newspapers and large-circulation magazines would not review small-press publications. Fortunately, this is beginning to change as the importance of small-press activities is being recognized. Still, most bookstores do not stock little magazines and small-press publications; and most public libraries do not subscribe. A small-press run rarely exceeds 2,000 copies, with poetry chapbooks falling in the range of 250 to 500.

The upshot of all this: that, although much is happening, the vast majority of the population, and even of the potential readers of serious literature, is simply unaware of most of the contemporary fiction and poetry being produced by the small press. And the upshot of *this* is a tendency for authors who publish in little magazines and the small press predominantly to

read and be read by each other. In other words, the audience for small-press publications tends to be the small-press community. Thus, much of the poetry, the innovative and experimental fiction produced in the nation is ghettoized unto itself and marginalized in its potential social influence.

And let's face it: in the tapestry of American society, literature is neither held in high esteem, nor is its encouragement a high priority. Beyond token lip service and the annual awarding of a scoop shovel of grants and prizes, "patronage" quickly assumes the aspect of patronizing. Literature is simply not taken seriously.

In my opinion, far too many literary writers have not only acquiesced in literature's marginalization within the society, they have also passively participated in the process by not seeing literature's role as crucial to the well-being of American culture as a whole and aggressively asserting this claim. Despite the growing numbers of writers' organizations, newsletters, directories of publications and "markets," independent distributors, and ventures in cooperative advertising and warehousing, despite the ever growing number of writers, magazines, and presses, the literary community remains regionally dispersed and atomized, and internally fragmented by an attitude prevalent among many authors of me-firstism, or go-it-alone — an individualistic pursuit of narrow purposes, self-centered careerism, self-indulgent preening. There is a sense of one's own practice and development, but little effort to understand how one's activity fits within, and contributes to, a larger whole — the life and achievement of the entire community. This state of affairs prevents literature and the literary community from having the influence in the larger culture which they might have.

The vitality of its literary culture is one index of a society's health. A vigorous literature fosters diversity of viewpoint, nurtures the imaginative faculties of the populace, enhances esthetic and ethical awareness (and thus the quality of life), and

provides avenues for innovative thought and an ongoing social critique. Forces in the society which are committed to the status quo and "business as usual" do not find such values beneficial or expedient, and would be far more comfortable if literary culture were marginalized in importance, ghettoized in its influence, and trivialized in its concerns

But when the vitality of literary culture is weakened — whether through marginalization, lack of readers, limitation of public access to its published works, conformism and lack of diversity, censorship (whether active or passive, externally- or self-imposed), or through a demoralizing loss of belief in its social importance on the part of its practitioners — there is a consequent and corresponding decline in the vitality of the society and the cultures it creates and embodies. Not only is the society deprived of the values which a vigorous literature provides, but the literary community itself — the writers, publishers, distributors, reviewers, and readers — also suffers demoralization and a sense of impotence which give rise to cynicism, shallow careerism, competitive me-firstism, withdrawal into masturbatory self-indulgence, retreat from the deep waters of social engagement to the safe activity of making mudpies in the shallows — and even the paralysis of despair.

Such attitudes and pursuits serve to further marginalize literature in the larger culture, trivialize its potential influence, and confirm its impotence. And thus people who might have become serious readers find no reason to take it seriously. Those in power who would prefer having literature posing no threat to the status quo are happy to reinforce these tendencies by rewarding innocuous and conformist writing with grants and prizes. The multinational media combines, free to market literary works as commodities to turn quick profit, are able through *what* they market, to further shape public taste to suit their purposes.

I think it's high time that, as a literary community, we embark on a shaping effort of our own: a longterm undertaking that will re-invigorate literary culture and once again integrate it

into the structural weave of society. I propose that we not concern ourselves with joining the mainstream current (which would entail our acquiescence in literature's being commodified, "managed," and trivialized), but instead aggressively bend our efforts to digging a new channel and diverting the current into a *new mainstream*. As writers, readers, publishers, distributors, critics, reviewers, and citizens, it is in our self-interest to do so.

Where, after all, does self-interest lie?

For authors, in being able to write and publish freely what they choose, to express what seems to them important, and in knowing that they are read.

For readers, in having access to a broad diversity of publications from which they can freely choose what personally appeals.

For publishers, in having the freedom and financial ability to choose, produce, and distribute the works they wish, and in earning enough through sales to stay in operation.

For the literary community as a whole, self-interest lies not merely in surviving, but in *thriving*. In pursuing self-interest as defined, the literary community would not be engaged in a merely self-serving enterprise, but would be serving the multifaceted complexity of American society as a whole by contributing to the health, vitality, and values of its various cultures.

With no illusions that the creation of a new mainstream will be easy (for we have our own deeply-engrained habits and prejudices to overcome, as well as external obstacles such as public indifference and distrust, general lack of reading skills, the diversionary entertainments already claiming the public's attention, and — if we prove to be at all successful — opposition and open hostility from some segments of the society which will be threatened). I make the following recommendations which hopefully provide some useful steps to a beginning. I propose:

- 1) That writers, editors of literary magazines and small-press publishers, distributors, reviewers, and those involved in arts funding and literary service organizations — as well as

readers and purchasers of literary works — come to conceive of themselves as a unified community of shared interests, and not only that, but also as a necessary and dynamic force for the preservation and enhancement of the intellectual, esthetic, ethical, and political vitality of American society and its cultures.

- 2) That writers cease to regard their writing and publishing as an essentially individualistic pursuit, but rather come to see them as acts of participation in the community enterprise. (This will in no way compromise individual expression or subordinate the individual writer to the group; rather, it will energize writers with the knowledge that their unique expressions are valuable contributions to a large group effort, and it will protect writers from succumbing to the self-centered (and self-limiting) notion that one's self and one's career is all that one has to be concerned with.)
- 3) That the literary community seek innovative ways to organize itself into flexible, democratic, self-sustaining institutional structures capable of achieving the community's aims and surviving in the face of economic hardship, neglect or freeze-out by oldstyle media and market forces, or political repression. This will entail exploring and establishing imaginative, unorthodox structures for financing, producing, promoting, and distributing literary works; structures for disseminating and exchanging information; for educating the public (especially the young); for supporting individuals, presses, or organizations which encounter censorship, vilification, or other instances of repression; for making possible concerted political action on the national scene when occasion demands it. The harassment, intimidation, and black-listings of the McCarthy Era could have a new incarnation under the proper conditions; the book-burners are already with us — we needn't wait for the Moral Climate people of Bradbury's *Usher II* or the Firemen of *Fahrenheit 451*; and we have bigots aplenty in Congress, zealots in the

NEA, and a Supreme Court whose decisions in the last ten years seem to be turning back the clock on civil liberties.

These institutional structures will necessarily have their grass-roots functioning on local and regional levels — but with strongly forged links to those of other regions for the creation of national networks. Regionally, we in Illinois already have in place a firm foundation on which to build structures to house the community I have proposed. There is IWI itself, a statewide service organization for writers and publishers of (currently) around 300 members which holds an annual conference and publishes informational newsletters and a review magazine. There is the recently-formed Independent Literary Publishers Association (ILPA) which distributes small-press publications nationally. There is a State Arts Council which maintains an Artists Registry and provides grant money for literary projects, supplemental aid for literary magazines, and awards for individual authors. There are local writers' groups and workshops around the state, including several programs for young writers operated through school districts. There is an active Illinois Library Association which acknowledges the importance of the small press, and a continuing *Read Illinois* program (sponsored by the Illinois State Library and the Illinois State Librarian), which is concerned with the Illinois literary heritage and the current state of writing in Illinois. There are numerous small presses and literary magazines, bookfairs, poetry readings, and literary competitions. Ways can be found to bring these organizations and activities into closer communication with one another. Therefore, although I have not previously discussed these recommendations with the leadership of Illinois Writers, Inc., I strongly suggest:

- 4) That IWI is the logical organization to take the initiative in exploring and planning ways for this to come about in Illinois. I recommend that IWI undertake this initiative and work out means for implementation. And further, to find ways to link up Illinois structures with comparable organiza-

tions and programs in other states and regions. I also recommend:

- 5) That the literary community be aware of, and able as a *community* to act effectively upon, concerns affecting all, or localized segments of, the independent writing and publishing community.
- 6) That the community undertake a concerted, imaginative, and longterm outreach effort to bring small-press literary publications, and literature in general, to the attention of the public at large:
 - a) by increasing public access to small-press publications in bookstores, libraries, and other (perhaps non-conventional) outlets. (This in time might require us to establish our own literary bookstores, encourage library subscriptions to package-plans, donate subscriptions or specific titles to get libraries started, etc.)
 - b) by fostering in the public at large (and particularly in children and adolescents) a conviction that serious literature is important to their lives and crucial to the well-being of American society as a whole. (Here media may be used: public access TV, radio talk shows, preparation of audio- and videotapes; establishment of short or long-term writing workshops in schools, community centers, youth programs, jails and prisons, and as a component of adult education and literacy programs — stressing as a motivational appeal not only self-expression, but personal self-empowerment. Grant money may be available for some of these efforts; if so, it should be used. But the community cannot rely on the availability of grant money, and it must not postpone action because grants are not forthcoming. We ourselves must be prepared to do what must be done. Necessarily there will have to be a massive volunteer effort — in which people are willing to commit time and energy without concerning themselves with financial

reimbursement. Most writers and editors of literary magazines and small presses are well accustomed to this type of commitment already.)

- c) by creating public interest in literary work by making literature ubiquitous — an unavoidable part of people's everyday lives — through a saturation strategy, such that the public comes to expect encountering it at every turn. (On the local level, means will vary. Possibilities: poetry columns in newspapers; placards on buses; literary festivals; free readings in public parks, open mike nights in taverns, broadsides posted on public bulletin boards, cheap printed pamphlets to be made available in bus and train stations, schools and community centers, supermarkets and laundromats; poetry postcards to be sold at specialty shops of various sorts and sent as cards-of-choice by community members. Possibilities are endless.)
- 7) That, in order to carry out these aims, the literary community — at least on the regional level — find means of maximizing efficiency, economy, and impact by pooling resources for specific purposes: money, skills and specialized knowledge, time and labor, services which address production, promotion, and distribution of literary works to the public, and which facilitate communication within the community in an adequate, equitable, and democratic fashion. (This will probably require a greater use of cooperative ventures than has heretofore been tried: joint projects, coordinated planning and decision-making for specific programs and longterm goals, sharing of facilities, contacts, and expertise, confederated efforts in promotion, advertising, warehousing, and distribution. These cooperative ventures in no way should interfere with the autonomy and independence of individual writers and publishers, individual entities are not to be subordinated to the group; rather, the aim should be to have their effectiveness in doing their own things enhanced by this pooling of resources. Pooling will make more things possible.)

- 8) That members, while expecting to volunteer time and effort to building the community and furthering its goals through participation in programs and educational efforts, individually commit themselves to sustaining the community with financial contributions. (Many of the activities suggested above will require money. As members of the community whose self-interest is being served by the activities and achievements of the community as a whole, writers should see it as an obligation to lend support where needed: helping a small press out by partially subsidizing the costs of producing their own or someone else's work; contributing directly to those community ventures they feel to be most important (perhaps as a response to special appeals, perhaps by subscribing in advance to major publishing projects, perhaps by contributing to community endowment funds on regional or national levels); supporting literary magazines by subscribing to as many as possible or purchasing gift subscriptions; supporting presses by buying books at levels commensurate with their financial means; budgeting X-dollars per year to support community activities; purchasing subscriptions and small-press books for donation to public libraries. Again, the community's projects cannot be dependent on external grants for implementation; state Arts Councils, private foundations, and the NEA cannot be relied on to supply the community's needs. Those needs must be met by the community itself.)

I therefore recommend:

- 9) That writers undertake the commitment to pledge 5% or 10% of the money they earn from their literary activities (royalties, prizes, fellowships, sales, fees, and honoraria from participating in workshops and readings) to sustaining community endeavors in some fashion. (A million-dollar book advance? \$100,000. Fifty dollars for a workshop gig? \$5.00 — equivalent to three packs of cigarettes or a ticket to the movies. In pledging a percentage of their literary

- earnings, writers would ultimately be serving their own self interest. In the long run, the stronger the community, the stronger the positions of everyone in it.)

To the extent that such efforts are successful — to the extent that the literary community comes to be perceived as a potent force in the cultural life of American society, to the extent that literature is truly felt to be important by the public at large and comes to have serious influence on the shape of social values — the community should be prepared to encounter organized and powerful opposition from special-interest groups which would prefer that literature not have to be taken seriously. The community should have contingency plans in place so that, with the courage and strength that come from solidarity, it can take swift and effective action to forestall or neutralize attempts at repression.

I hope this essay provides a contribution toward strengthening a sense of literary community. Its intent is to stimulate dialogue which will lead to action. . . .

References

¹ See Paul Mattick, Jr., "Arts and the State: The N.E.A. Debate in Perspective," *The Nation* (Oct. 1, 1990), 348-358; Frank Conroy, "Political Crossfire and the NEA," *AWP Chronicle* (Feb, 1990), 18-19; T. R. Hummer, "Censorship, Obscenity, & Secrecy: Slapping the Face of the Body Politic," *AWP Chronicle* (Sept., 1990), 1, 5-8.

² "Arts Strings Tie Up Grantees," *Poets & Writers* (July/Aug., 1990), 11.

³ "More NEA Arts Strings," *Poets & Writers* (Sept./Oct., 1990), 6-7.

⁴ Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation* (June 12, 1989), 805-820. A well-researched and sobering account of the takeover of world media by a handful of multinational conglomerates.

⁵ "Newhoused," *The Nation* (March 19, 1990), 369.

FOLLOW-UP HISTORICAL NOTE (2020)

In 1990, the editors of *Illinois Writers Review* asked me to write this article assessing the present state of publishing. In the thirty years since the essay appeared, many changes have accrued to the shape and functioning of the American literary and publishing community. My aim in 1990 was to encourage members of the *Illinois* literary community (as represented by Illinois Writers, Inc.) to re-think and broaden their conception of what their fellowship of shared interests might allow and encourage IWI to become. In 1990, numerous literary service organizations existed in various locations around the nation (i.e., writers' and self-publishers' workshops and cooperative ventures—some of them highly specialized to address issues in book and magazine production, marketing, and distribution). These organizations often included communication networks and community-building aids such as journals, how-to pamphlets, newsletters, conferences, and (after the advent of the personal computer) websites, blogs, and chatrooms.

In the thirty years following my article's appearance, changes in book distribution and sales have been profound. Many free-standing brick-and-mortar bookstores disappeared; large chains (some of them with hundreds of outlets in shopping malls) underwent buy-outs and mergers, unable to compete with the discounted book sales offered on-line by Amazon.com.

Although IWI had a sizable membership, a Review journal, a newsletter, a board of directors, shared warehousing of members' books, and periodic meetings, my essay did not evoke much response from the organization. I felt that internal communication was weak, and long-range vision lacking. I did not see much enthusiasm, excitement, or commitment for exploring how the organization could promote solidarity among its members, and undertake educating the public regarding the cultural importance of literature.

From the early 1970's until 1996 one of the most successful literary service organizations was COSMEP (Committee of Small Magazines Editors and Publishers). In the words of Tom Person in his article "Life after COSMEP" (*Laughing Bear Newsletter*), it was "a national organization for both literary and non-literary publishers, run by an elected board, that serv[ed] as a cooperative for information and services."

As a successful service organization fulfilling a range of functions, COSMEP in 1990 stood as a *partial* model for what Illinois Writers, Incorporated might become. But sadly that wasn't the only model that COSMEP represented. In 1996 its board of directors closed the organization down. Tom Person's comments explaining the board's reasons for taking this action are both insightful and instructive in identifying the perennial dangers that such organizations typically face. "Unfortunately," says Person, "the organization was unable or unwilling to rise above its inside squabbling to take us any farther. . . . The needs of publishers in the 1990s are very different from those of the '60s. While it is important to be in touch with tradition, the technologies of publishing and marketing move too fast for publishers to invest in an association that can't or won't keep up. At the time it went under, COSMEP had no database of members other than the mailing list, which was updated by hand. In a field as reliant on computers as publishing, COSMEP was definitely not leading edge. . . . Over the years, the function of the COSMEP board degenerated into bureaucracy. Factions fought for control of the board. Projects became secondary to politics. Survival of the organization became more important than service to the members. Decay and obsolescence became inevitable as members got fed up and left." Future planners and reformers, please take note: *Forewarned is forearmed*.

COSMEP failed because of attrition, unresolved internal contradictions, personal rivalries, and fatigue. IWI, after a successful run of several years, also ceased operations. It may be that the kind of organizational effort I envisioned in 1990 for strengthening a sense of literary community is inherently

impossible to sustain for long periods. Energies are limited, and writers, editors, publishers, and reviewers—whether professionals earning a living with their labors, or amateur hobbyists—are understandably committed to prioritizing their own work, “careers”, and literary development. There may indeed be political differences and personal jealousies that interfere with building and maintaining solidarity. Inevitably there will be tendencies toward organizational bureaucracy that will have to be recognized and thwarted. And changes in technology and cultural norms will perpetually modify literary production, publication, and distribution—changes which will tend to create tensions between younger and older members of the community.

Particular service organizations may come and go; but if a philosophical consensus and conviction can be achieved that the creation of a cohesive literary community is not only inherently worthwhile for its members but *necessary* for the health of society as a whole, that consensus and conviction (with hard work, the will to succeed, and a reservoir of good luck) might actually bring the strengthened community into being. But to do so will require (of individuals *and* the group) open-mindedness, flexibility, willingness to explore, awareness of potential booby-traps and attendant dangers, adaptability, determination, and discipline.

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