

# From Description to *Opsis*

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The category of literary description, according to the established tradition, attested by an entry in a dictionary of literary terms, is predominantly associated with narrative genres, or – in extremis – with a lyric monologue, which, after all, also represents narrative genres. Description, according to the classical definition (which has been since “updated”), “presents elements of the represented world that do not concern events. It is a background against which events take place, providing information on the appearance of characters, etc., it is essentially a timeless conceptualization, it shows elements and features of a given object in their equilibrium and especially frequently – in their spatial orientation”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, it presents elements and characteristics of the represented world as a basic compositional element of a text. Importantly, this element limits the Ingardenian (*nomen omen*) appearances typically proposed in a text to a projection of their visual dimension.

The represented world is not a construct reserved only for prose and poetry. Moreover, “the third genre”, ignored in the general reflection upon literary description, fully meets the criteria of the above-mentioned definition and displays its presence in an especially complex way, making it, as an ontic basis of on-stage reality, *de facto* one of the most important questions concerning drama theory. The reality presented to the audience is material and spatial, yet it primarily stems from language. Spatialization is a basic compositional dynamism in drama. So, if the ultimate goal of description is to construct the represented world in a text, one should ask how this can be achieved using the artistic means characteristic for each of the three literary genres.

<sup>1</sup> Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1976), 280. [translation mine, PZ]

The strictly-defined category of description, traditionally connected mostly with epic, despite its significance, has never been a central problem to considerations regarding drama theory. Among the few scholars who have dealt with this issue, Anne Ubersfeld stressed that the fact that she depreciated the role of description in drama results from the peculiar character of dramatic texts. For the theatrical text is:

“[...] the only literary text that absolutely cannot be read according to a diachronic succession of reading, and that opens itself to understanding only through layers of synchronic signs tiered in space, spatialized signs. Whatever spatialization is produced by a literary text, whatever spatializing a reader accomplished when reading a novel (a novel localizes the activity of its characters through description), it remains true that the space of a novel is flat, even materially flat.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Ubersfeld, poetry is similarly flat. However, dramatic texts are the “flattest”:

„[...] it does not describe its own spatiality. (Place descriptions are always quite sketchy and, with rare notable exceptions, found only at specific places in the text.) Also, place descriptions serve a functional, rarely poetic purpose involving not an imaginary construct but rather the practice of performance, arrangement within space.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Ubersfeld recognizes that this rule can be broken – for instance, in Racine’s plays. This inconsequentiality is related to the obviously numerous articulations of dramatic poetics, similarly to the whole corpus of works of literature which are subject to the directive of description to various degrees.

The rule of principal delineation of genetheological forms (also applied to past phenomena), considered anachronistic in the age of “annihilation of genres”, also questions the rigorous assignment, sometimes exclusively, of certain conventions and artistic measures (*ergo* also description) to each one of them. The famous circle by Emil Staiger or the methodological narrative breakthrough which dominates the category of the short story, have been arguing for years in the space of theoretical discourse that in drama, to a greater or lesser degree, one can always find literary phenomena typical for prose. The ancient distinction between *diegesis-mimesis* seems to ultimately find a harmonious symbiosis in the Aristotelian *opsis*, also in theatrical practice. Questions concerning its place and means of articulation in the structure of a play will generally be reduced to questions about ways of manifestations of represented reality in it, predominantly everything related to its potential stage role.

Patrice Pavis quotes an old thought by Jean-François Marmontel, who distinguished between narration and description:

„Narration is representation of facts, just like description is representation of objects”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, translated by Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 94-95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*: 95.

<sup>4</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Słownik terminów teatralnych*, translated by Sławomir Świontek, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1998) 319. [translation mine, PZ]

He proceeds to explain that:

„In theater description is done through a visual representation of things, while narration shows events *in actu* as elements of the story line. Hence, in theater narration is realized through discursive means characteristic for the visual way of stage presentation.”<sup>5</sup>

Jerzy Ziomek treats the written record as one of the possible elocutions of a text<sup>6</sup>. As a result, this claim allows for treating the description of the represented world for the stage as equal to narrative description. This project of the world *in potentia*, limited to a literary work, world on the level of unfinished linguistic record, is able to realize itself materially through executive dispositions it contains, which are also discussed by Ziomek<sup>7</sup>. The “descriptiveness” of drama, significantly and partially pointed out by Ubersfeld, in the parts which are subject to the laws of “stage display” in execution comes from the rigor of diachrony to a synchronic projection, which is sometimes treated as the “spatialization” of literature. Description and descriptiveness, both executive directives, are obligatory qualities in drama, performative *par excellence*, for the goal of drama is to show rather than describe. It goes from successive *récit* to simultaneous *représenter*.

The way of existence of the represented world in drama has been of interest for phenomenologists – both Ingardenian, focusing mostly on the literary work itself, and representatives of the American school, for whom drama and theater constituted an adequate example of philosophical theses. However, the problem of the model of a world presented in a given work as a phenomenon creating a physically-manifested stage reality appears in both conceptualizations. For Roman Ingarden, a spectacle is a borderline case of a literary work, which subjects drama to the double power of realization in the process of stage performance, both as a written text, and materialized staging, maintaining in the previous form the layer of represented objects and meanings, while changing the layer of sounds and schematic appearances. According to Ingarden, the represented world in drama consists of the objects (things, people, processes) shown:

- directly on stage (perceptive appearances)
- in two ways
  - a) directly on stage
  - b) through language, if they are spoken about on stage
- only through language, although such objects remain in relationships with objects shown directly on stage<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem. [Translation mine, PZ]

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Ziomek, *Semiotyczne problemy sztuki teatru*, [in:] Idem, *Powinowactwa literatury. Studia i szkice*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1980), 139.

<sup>7</sup> Jerzy Ziomek, *Projekt wykonawcy w dziele literackim a problemy genologiczne*, [in:] Idem, *Powinowactwa literatury. Studia i szkice*, (Warszawa: PWN, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> R. Ingarden, *O funkcjach mowy w widowisku teatralnym*, [in:] *Problemy teorii dramatu i teatru*, selected and edited by Janusz Degler (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1988).

The duality of appearance of the represented world pointed out by Ingarden, ordained on the level of literary text, is divided in stage realization into entities materialized in the theatrical space, and those which are closer to the linguistic medium, remaining only in the sphere of direct descriptiveness of a word. This observation is both obvious and fundamental for considerations regarding the role of description in drama texts, which are somewhere in between the narrative function, typical for literature, and the spectacle's *opsis*.

The concept of drama as a music score can be useful for conducting analyses regarding the executive aspects of drama, *ergo* materializing translation of its descriptiveness (in the Anglo-American theory known as *from page to stage*). In Poland, it has been popularized by Zbigniew Raszewski<sup>9</sup>, who was nevertheless highly skeptical about it, proposing to consider “the issue of drama” in a close relation to its ultimate, theatrical purpose. Drama understood as a music score, as a text to be performed, despite Raszewski's reservations, inherently contains more or less precise indicators regarding its theatrical realization, “describing” also the shape of the stage world. Although these premises are not always formulated in the form of an *expressis verbis* description (typical for stage directions), they still project stage appearances, sounds or movements.

The descriptive directive of drama can concern one of the three spatial formations:

- space shown on stage
- adjacent space (by the stage)
- narrated space.

Each has a different model of descriptiveness which brings it into existence. The project of a world dedicated to a three-dimensional, **directly, sensually-perceived** stage space is the most characteristic for drama. Dispositions contained in a literary text regarding its materialized appearances, sounds, and sometimes also smells or – in rare cases – tactile impressions are the moving spirit for its fulfillment. The adjacent space (by the stage) excludes the indirect visual projection, limiting itself to sounds, light, and activities which constitute and stem from it, sometimes also describing it with words and characters, which can be treated as a theatrical **metonymy** of a sort. The narrated space is controlled by the language, as a **substitute of stage materiality**, stemming from the power of literary description that brings it to life in its proper, only narrative, shape.

The phenomenon of constituting space created in drama goes beyond the restrictive, established poetological principles, which mainly come down to description articulated on the narrative level. Descriptiveness, which I see as a broader category than description (which is still frequently associated mostly with the general interpretation proposed in dictionaries of literary terms), in drama most frequently occurs in the guise of an obligatory compositional directive, which purely pragmatically only determines the stage picture of the place of action, generally ignoring its stylistic aspect. Instead of literary “overproviding” of description, drama typically

<sup>9</sup> Zbigniew Raszewski, *Partytura teatralna*, [in:] *Problemy teorii dramatu i teatru*, selected and edited by Janusz Degler (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1988).

offers its functionality.<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic expression related to it typically occurs only in the material, theatrical articulation of the text. The dominating, practical dimension of description/descriptiveness submits them to various forms of genealogical drama, oscillating between the maximum condensation of details (for example, direct, long descriptions in stage directions in a naturalistic drama) and immanent, indirect descriptiveness derived not from the descriptive parts of a text expressed in words, but from the assumed theatrical poetics, the musical score of stage movement or actions of a character. A broadly-treated description modeling the stage reality in a drama, typically “frozen” in the stage directions opening subsequent acts of a realist drama ultimately turns out to be a potentially dynamic category, constituting a physical basis for the events presented in the play.

In his famous paper *O opisie*,<sup>11</sup> Janusz Sławiński points out this trend in research into description, which by treating it as an “extra-linguistic” category considers it a compositional element of the morphology of the represented world. He associates its significance mostly with the structurally defined action and the kinds of actors performing it, and yet – by the same token – shifts description from the linear story to close to the stage, a three-dimensional scheme of the represented reality. In its dramatic articulation, it is subject to the rule of specific, historically-shaped theatrical aesthetics.

The image of the world generalized from a literary text generally depends on two factors which determine it:

- inner-textual executive dispositions contained in stage directions and dialogues
- the theater convention to which a given play belongs, established aesthetic norms, and repetitive staging standards which do not require any additional specific information, defining the shape of the world in the main text and trivia.

This situation concerns ancient Greek tragedies which always take place in the same scenery, Terentius’s comedies, or more conventionalized comedies dell’arte. The three typified kinds of decorations for tragedy, comedy and pastoral drama also applied to the classicist theater. The so-called “free regions” used many times as scenography for subsequent premieres even in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are a distant echo of this rule. In many cases, the knowledge of the theatrical architecture to which a given play was addressed – the ancient amphitheater, the Renaissance’s Terentius stage, or the Elizabethan theater – is significant in the reading of the presented reality belonging to a play, which does not require any description.

The way of manifesting description constituting the represented world in drama can be called gradational: from its direct form, most typical for prose texts, through indirect description, to the broadly understood category of extra-linguistic descriptiveness.

<sup>10</sup>Poetic stage directions “to be read” in symbolic dramas are an obvious exception. One intriguing example is *Bazylissa Teofanu* by Tadeusz Miciński, which describes in great detail elements of the interior of a temple presented on stage, giving the character of such a ritual to a show which takes place in the presence of the audience, unaware that they are taking part in it. The genre modus of stage texts, discussed here only marginally, combining the poetics of space with the poetics of drama, similarly to other literary genres, obviously plays a fundamental role in considerations regarding literary description, transferring it in the field of historical poetics.

<sup>11</sup>Janusz Sławiński, *O opisie*, „Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja” 55, No 1 (1981): 119-120.

**Direct (or proper) description**, identical with the general definition from a dictionary of literary terms. It appears not only in the form of trivia (similar to prose), but also in dialogues, not infrequently taking over the function of a lyrical monologue. The first one concerns two out of the three listed formats of space (presented and adjacent); the main text, through telling it, may also additionally present the appearances of the last one – narrated. Direct description most often corresponds with the traditional narrative description – **objectified** in the form of stage directions and often **subjectified** in dialogues.

**Stage directions, as trivia** in a drama, exhaust the dictionary criteria of description quoted at the beginning and find their fullest realization in the realist-naturalist drama, most closely corresponding with the descriptiveness of the traditional naturalist and realist novel. Presenting the picture of the created world, they display qualities of developed and concise description defined by Sławiński<sup>12</sup>. Descriptions contained in stage directions most often include interiors directly shown on stage, and through designed, selected theater signs suggests the presence of adjacent, imagined rooms and landscapes. Hence, in reference to stage directions, we could distinguish a **visualizing and suggesting description**. It does not have a cumulative character, because it does not develop itself. It remains beyond chronological order, for the order of the subsequent sequences does not play any role in the theatrical practice. The description of a stabilized picture, transferred on stage, sentenced to simultaneity, framed in a snapshot which cuts it out of reality, is subject to inversion; it can begin from any piece and be developed in any direction. In the realist or naturalist convention, it has a clearly enumerative character.<sup>13</sup> It does not meet the traditional criterion of cohesion of a literary text or dialogues in drama, transferring itself from the stylistic-syntactic level to the assumed theatrical convention and stage pragmatics. A clear example of the enumerative description of the place of action, characteristic for a naturalist drama, doing its duty for the postulate of photographic mirroring of reality, can be found in *The Weavers* by Gerhart Hauptmann. It contains two typical subjects of description space and characters, both for realist prose, and for constituting the world of stage sound:

A small room in the house of Wilhelm Ansorge, weaver and cottager in the village of Kaschhach, in the Eulengehirge. In this room, which does not measure six feet from the dilapidated wooden floor to the smoke-blackened rafters, sit four people. Two young girls, Emma and Bertha Baumert, are working at their looms; Mother Baumert, a decrepit old woman, sits on a stool beside the bed, with a winding-wheel in front of her; her idiot son August sits on a foot-stool, also winding. He is twenty, has a small body and head, and long, spider-like legs and arms. Faint, rosy evening light makes its way through two small windows in the right wall [...]. On the stove rail rags are hanging to dry, and behind the stove is a collection of worthless lumber. On the bench stand some old pots and cooking utensils, and potato parings are laid out on it, on paper, to dry. Hanks of yarn and reels hang from the rafters; baskets of bob-bins stand beside the looms [...].The room is full of sound — the rhyth-

<sup>12</sup>Janusz Sławiński, *O opisie*, op. cit.: 124.

<sup>13</sup>In *O opisie*, Sławiński points out the descriptive category of *enumerato* (p. 127 and 129), which “stiffens” the text and leads to a “dictionary order”, threatening its artistry. It is obligatory for stage directions in many subgenres of broadly-understood realist drama; within the “localizing model” defined by Sławiński (p. 129) situating objects in space, it has a utilitarian character which remains beyond literary aesthetics. Its artistry is realized in its stage design, constituting a dominion of aesthetics of art and is a theatrical realization *à rebours* of ekphrasis.

mic thud of the looms, shaking floor and walls, the click and rattle of the shuttles passing back and forward, and the steady whirr of the winding-wheels, like the hum of gigantic bees<sup>14</sup>.

According to Sławiński, while reporting Roland Barthes's reflections<sup>15</sup>, for drama, stage directions are "a place of a break", similar to descriptions in prose. In classical or realist drama, this break is most often naturally related to an interval preceding the subsequent act, constituting a signal of the passage of time<sup>16</sup> and change of location. Typically, an elaborate description of a scene, clearly distinct from the plot and inaccessible to the perception of the viewer, is only an instruction for the stage arranger. Elements which are subject to description can appear only as a background for events, beyond plot functions (especially when it is designed as a flat painted scenography). However, they can also actively participate in the events, like Chekhov's famous gun. The descriptiveness of the trivia, in line with its basic purpose, plays a crucial role for the material, scenographic articulation of the represented world designed in a drama, significantly organizing the shape of the stage space, defining the theatrical aesthetics, stage movement, and actors' play. Stage directions are subject to the temporal directive of the **present tense**. In the case of realist genres, they employ evaluative terms characteristic for prose descriptions. Poetic, romanticist, surrealist, expressionist dramas also often resign from "dry" descriptions. Although, for example, in the latter they still seemingly shape places of action "external" to the protagonist, they in fact constitute a projection of the psychological interior of individuals. An example of a "mental landscape" enriched with sounds added to a living room typical for a realist stage<sup>17</sup> can be found in *The Road to Damascus*:

„KITCHEN

*It is dark, but the moon outside throws moving shadows of the window lattices on to the floor, as the storm clouds race by. In the corner, right, under the crucifix, where the OLD MAN used to sit, a hunting horn, a gun and a game bag hang on the wall. On the table a stuffed bird of prey. As the windows are open the curtains are flapping in the wind; and kitchen cloths, aprons and towels, that are hung on a line by the hearth, move in the wind, whose sighing can be heard. In the distance the noise of a waterfall. There is an occasional tapping on the wooden floor.*<sup>18</sup>

The **main text** and the description it contains is approaching a story included in the dialogue taking place. In principle, it refers to the location and objects not shown on stage; thus, it is closest to forms of description characteristic for prose. However, in isolated cases, it defines elements of the presented reality within the stage and adjacent space. Although marked with the subjectivism of a talking protagonist (which sometimes brings it closer to a lyrical mono-

<sup>14</sup>Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Weavers*, translated by Mary Morrison, New York, 1925.

<sup>15</sup>Janusz Sławiński, op. cit.: 122.

<sup>16</sup>Classicism drama, respecting the obligatory principle of three unities, presented stage events limited to 24 hours in subsequent acts, marking the passage of time in the description of the place of action, by, for example, placing the sun or the moon behind a window.

<sup>17</sup>Stindberg's description displays characteristics of pictorial imaging, giving it an artistic autonomy, characteristic for later expressionist and expressionistic movie. For example, in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene, representative for the genre, there appears a motif of a prison-interior and barred window, used years before in *To Damascus*.

<sup>18</sup>August Strindberg, *The Road to Damascus*, translated by Esther Johanson and Graham Rawson, 2013.

logue), it can thus take over the functional role of stage directions. The individualized subject of a statement often decides its emotive and evaluative dimension:

„Jean

[...] Once I went with my mother inside the garden, to weed out the onion bed. Close by the garden wall there stood a Turkish pavilion, shaded by jasmine and surrounded by wild roses. I had no idea what it was used for, but I'd never seen so fine a building. People went in and out, and one day the door stood open. I sneaked in, and saw the walls covered with pictures of queens and emperors, and red curtains with fringes were in front of the windows now you know what I mean.

*He takes a lilac branch and holds it under the young lady's nose*

I'd never been in the Abbey, and I'd never seen anything else but the church but this was much finer.<sup>19</sup>

The poetics of a classical drama has fixed forms close to short stories and prose descriptions, dividing the corpus of a play with narrative parts. Their presence allows for the presentation of places and events that are difficult to show directly on stage due to technical limitations and customs premises. The ancient *teichoscopy* belongs to especially famous applications of narrative-descriptive strategies in drama; one drama character gives an account of events that take place beyond stage (for example, an envoy's account), employed in the *bienséance* tragedies by Racine, which use this technique to give an account of cruel and immoral events. On-stage monologues, tirades, or action expositions, close to the category of a short story, are marked with narrative descriptiveness. The objectifying description finds an important place in an epic drama, in principle not only trans-genre, but also fulfilling the ideological socio-political mission. The works of Bertolt Brecht, in line with his artistic *credo* deconstructing the Aristotelian drama tradition, shifts the stress from on-stage action and actors' performance to dry description and storytelling, sometimes – like in the case of *Mother Courage and Her Children* – having a character of a grand war epic poem. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* constitutes an expressive form of episodizing drama on genealogical level, closing in a narrative frame in a “play-within-a-play” way the story of Grusha, who travels through an epic world, as told by a folk singer.

**An indirect description, i.e. quasi-description**, situated in the main text, but not independent, situational, related to the *ad hoc* context of a given scene. To some extent, it constitutes an equivalent of the “dispersed description” defined by Sławiński<sup>20</sup>. The manifestations of places, objects and people which stem from it can barely be generalized from the dialogues and the accompanying stage behaviors. Sometimes, subject to a peculiar “narration of points of view”, it shows the same elements of the presented world as seen through the eyes of several characters in a “dialogued”, differentiating way.

**Descriptiveness**, a super-linguistic category. Although it stems from the literary record of a drama, it remains beyond the direct semantics of a word. On stage, it is realized with the use of a code other than a linguistic one. Often, it does not require stage directions. It results from selected dramatic-theatrical poetics which suffices in terms of description, from

<sup>19</sup>August Strindberg, *Panna Julia*, [in:] idem, op. cit.,: 134.

<sup>20</sup>Janusz Sławiński, op. cit.: 124.

the rhythm of dialogues (plays by Aleksander Fredro, *Porwanie Europy* by Marek Rymkiewicz), and scores of movement (comedies-ballets by Molière) in designing stage appearances; it does not need lexical denotations. It selects pictures, colors and spatial compositions out of the dynamics of the presented actions. The obligatory stage visualization, situated in the matter of descriptiveness of the world, is sometimes a subject of a meta-theatrical game, like in the case of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, where the protagonists select pieces of the surrounding reality by using pantomimic gestures<sup>21</sup>. Tomasz Łubieński jokingly refers to the compulsion of materializing the stage universe, subject to intersemiotic re-codings in the stage directions to *Koczwiska*, creating the presented world according to the rule “if you can hear it, you can see it”.

Ultimately the shape of the presented world directly on stage is always the result of negotiations between the author and the stage arranger. Thus, a theoretical reflection should be a significant development of reflections regarding description and descriptiveness in drama, due to their potential theatrics, apart from their obvious semiological conceptualization, referring hermeneutic and cognitive optics.

Manifestations of the descriptiveness phenomenon found in drama not only correspond with forms of description in prose in their significant representation, but also notably broaden their register. This is a reflection of Roland Barthes, who in his *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* categorically states that:

[...] the role of storytelling is not to “represent” [*représenter*], but to construct a spectacle [...] <sup>22</sup>

which proves the invalidity of the custom, well-established in the poetics discourse, of excluding studies into describing drama. Barthes denies the ability to present the world with a realistic description, which inevitably will be transformed into a spectacle. Extracted with a frame (stage frame), it always demonstrates its theatrical character. Confirmed by Barthes’s reflections, the potential theatrics of any literary text, transitivity of epic/stage description, in consequence makes an obligatory category for all literary genres out of dramatic description as an executive directive. Thus, perversely, by pointing out the ignoring of theoreticians, dramatic descriptiveness could be considered to be the most complex and functional, fulfilling all the models of descriptiveness in a work of literature.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>21</sup>Artists responded to the theatrical “dictate” of scenography with a concept of an empty space or “naked” stage postulated by some of the representatives of the Great Theatre Reform.

<sup>22</sup>Roland Barthes, *Wstęp do analizy strukturalnej opowiadań*, translated by Wanda Błońska, [in:] *Studia z teorii literatury. Archiwum przekładów „Pamiętnika Literackiego”*, edited by Michał Głowiński, Henryk Markiewicz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo 1977), 156.

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# KEYWORDS

staging

STAGE DIRECTIONS

t h e a t e r

music score

**ABSTRACT:**

The compositional category of description and more broadly understood descriptiveness in drama has always been marginalized in the theatrical-literary discourse. However, the models of description appearing in it, due to its stage purpose, are characterized by not only the richness of articulation, but also constitute an element *sine qua non* in creating the presented reality. It includes three spatial models: space shown on stage, adjacent space (by the stage), narrated space. Direct description proves to be the most typical for drama, which occurs either in stage directions, or in the main text. However, the dispersed quasi-description contained in the dialogues or the sub-linguistic descriptiveness realized excluding the semantics of a word.

s p a c e

d e s c r i p t i o n

**DRAMA**

*m a i n t e x t*

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