Theory *in* Literature[*]

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Abstract:

The assumption sustained in this paper is as basic as it is simple: Theory is an integrated dimension of any work of fiction, not an conceptual construct imposed on it from outside. This approach is not primarily concerned with works with an artist as protagonist, loaded with art discussion, exposing metafictional features or thematizing the ontological differences between art and life. The focus is that any interpretation or creation, even of the most unique work of art, calls upon generalized reflections beyond the confine of the cover if we want to claim that we have interpreted it or made it emerge at all, even in its singularity. The quest for generality is embedded, nolens volens, in any work art is its minimal inherent theoretical dimension. With the problem of genre as example, and Henry James and Jean Racine as basic references, the article unfolds in detail the consequences of this aristotelean view point.

Résumé

Arbejdspapiret tese er enkel og simpel: teori er en integreret del af fiktive værker, ikke en begrebskonstruktion der påtvinges værkerne udefra. Denne indfaldsvinkel fokuserer ikke først og fremmest på værker med en kunstner som hovedperson, med fyldige kunstdiskussioner, med metafiktionelle træk eller med en ontologisk tematik om forholdet mellem liv og kunst. Hovedsagen er at enhver fortolkning eller skabelse, selv af de mest unikke kunstværk, fremkaldes generaliserende begrebsdannelser hinsides omslaget hvis vi vil påstå at have fortolket eller have frembragt værket, selv i dets enestående fremtræden. Kravet om generalitet er, nolens volens, indlejret i ethvert værk som dets minimale iboende teoretiske dimension. Med genreproblemet som eksempel og Henry James og Jean Racine som primære referencer, udfolder artiklen i detaljer konsekvenserne af dette aristoteliske synspunkt.

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[*] This paper was presented at the annual meeting in The Theory of Literature Committee of the International Comparative Literature Association in Pecs, Hungary, May 20-23, 1999.

Literatheory

The history of literature and criticism offers us a panoply of ways of interconnecting theory and literature. The assumption sustained in this paper is as basic as it is simple: Theory is an integrated dimension of any work of fiction. It is not primarily a discursive realm outside literature itself developed by theoreticians, now sheding light on the intricacies of the otherwise obscure meandering of the fictional maze, now parasitically, as it were, adding to the work for the sake of the internal progress of literary institutions and its professionals. Theory is not a thief more or less discretely rummaging the houses of fiction; it has always been living there. Theory inhabits the texts of fiction. What does theory mean from this point of view and what are consequences of this approach for literary analysis? These are the questions I set out to discuss.

It is not difficult to accept that theory is part and parcel of many works. We find, for example, theory as a topic for explicit discussion involving the characters and now and then also the narrator. Apart from numerous works with an artist as protagonist, let me mention Hamlet's welcome to the actors entering Helsinore Castle, or the various discussions in Balzac's works when he points to the multifacetted social role of art and literature in the life of artists and in the new urban society at large in, for example, *Illusions perdues*, or when he less spectacularly scrutinizes its existential role in, for example, *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*. Of course, in works like *Don Quijote* or Mann's *Doktor Faustus* the social and existential dimensions are superbly synthezised.

We also recognize the ontological discussion of the very nature and condition of artistic creativity as a profound literary motif from Orpheus' encounter with Eurydice to Borges' games with referential truth. Moreover, in the reflections on the power of imaginary and allegorical language of poetry and fiction, literature and art often emphasize the elevated, or extraordinary, status of characters and events above the trivialities of everyday life and thus present or imply a theory on the relation between both levels of life, as in Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, Dante's *Divina Commedia* and his *Vita Nuova*, or, very differently, in the ekphrastic appraisal of Achilleus' shield in *The Iliad*. Furthermore, the long list of metafictional works, including *Jacques le Fataliste*, *Tristram Shandy* and *The New York*

Trilogy among many others including, of course, Mallarmé and his *œuvre*, presents a theory of what literature is and what it does in the fictional structure itself. They same goes, although with a considerably lesser complexity, for M. Jourdain taking advantage of literature as a social lever.

The common denominator for these loosely categorized examples is that they, in various and numerous ways, refer to aesthetic production, including self-reference, in order to articulate - positively or negatively, desperately or ecstatically - how artificial life distantiates itself from real life or from nature, questioning, in the process, the dubious ontological status of both. But such works are not theoretical in the sense that they, implicitly or explicitly, contain a specific theory that can be spelled out as a doctrine. Rather, they invite us, or force us, to theorize about literature while reading or producing it, not afterwards, as an inevitable aspect of our reflexion on literature. They show that any interpretation or creation, even of the most unique work of art, calls upon generalized reflections beyond the confine of the cover if we want to claim that we have interpreted it or made it emerge at all, even in its singularity.

Against this ontological backdrop two traditional dichotomies that situate theory in relation to other activities and discourses can be brought into play. First the dichotomy of *action*, known since antiquity as the opposition between theory and practice: two separate activities, one of non-reflective action followed by a reflection or 'an overview', opening the closed, singular action to a wider and principal perspective or, on the other hand, a theoretical hypothesis or a methodological guideline of general importance is followed by an instatiation or exemplification in a particular action. In literature, these two aspects are intricably mixed when the theory grows out of the text because the very identification and reading of the text requires the intervention of general ideas along with the reading process or, alternatively, when a prescriptive theory of the drama or the novel precedes the actual work of the writer.

There is a dialectic at work here that opens, even in the most singular and stubbornly unique work of art, a general perspective during the process of writing as well as during the process of reading. Theory in literature is not a set of axioms, theoremes, and quotable definitions. Its fundamental quality is to constitute this

dialectical relationship between the individual and generalizable parts of the work. This relationship inserts any singular and perhaps new phenomenon into a known structure which thereby perhaps is subject to change, a change that also reorients the theory. Therefore, we may call this dialectic history. Literature is part of history because it contains theories.

The theory-practice dichotomy entails another classical dichotomy, that of *discourse*, according to which theory and fiction are two mutually exclusive discourses with different claims concerning referential truth. From Plato to speech act theories and possible world semantics this dichotomy has been constantly reiterated from a truth-conditional perspective on discourse, that is from a philosophical perspective with a logical bent. From other perspectives - in for example that of phenomenology and the ensuing deconstructionism - the point is that although fiction as a conceptually defined phenomenon may be distinguished from theory, the fictional texts themselves - and, for some, also the philosphical texts as well - transcend such an opposition.

Any linguistic text deals with the possible, the future, the virtual, the non-real, etc., that is with everything that is not just a repetition or a generalized version of the given experience or the known semantic structures but is different from them. This is so, simply because mode, tense, case, conditional expressions, subjunctives, etc., constitute an inherent grammatical potential that is active, at least periphrastically, in any language. Therefore fictionality, from realism to surrealism, is implicitly present in any language use. Literature and theoretical reflection does not belong to categorically different discursive levels, but constitute language uses with different dominant tendencies. Any literature articulates theoretical issues related to its discursiveness, and any theoretical discourse works on the shaky basis of fictional constructions. The problems of the status of the discursive levels of a text and their interrelatonship are addressed by any text but is not solved by the text itself. That is why this immanent questioning is a matter of theory concerning textual processes as such.

Henry James: Kinds as Theory

If the art-reality dichotomy indicates *what* is foregrounded by the theoretical dimension of a literary work, the discursive dichotomy underlines *how* the theoretical dimension is manifested: in a the dialogical or polyphonic structure of the literary work, as Bakhtin has shown, or in more general terms, the focus on theory in fiction forces us to look at texts as dynamic processes, not as static facts. The discusssion of theory in literature invites us both to emphasize the productive fuzziness of the theory-fiction distinction in ontological and discursive terms and to make it analytically relevant, that is to see practice as a corrolary to theory, not as its opposite.

I think this invitation, first of all, takes us to the problem of *kinds* or *genres*, in a European context the pivotal point of theoretical reflection on literature (and other subjects) since Aristotle's *Poetics*. Many other types of theoretical reflection may be triggered by a literary text than generic ones, but no fictional text, even the most aberrant and disruptive linguistic experiment, can avoid to be confronted with questions such as: what kind does it differ from, what does it challenge, what does it follow, what does it, *nolens volens*, look like, etc.

In view of the mix of dramatic and epic techniques he exploits in his novels to perform the ideal of 'showing' in stead of 'telling', Henry James - a keen theorizing writer both inside and outside his fiction - states the following in the preface to *The Awkward Age* (1899) (James 1962: 111):

> This objectivity [of showing] […] when achieving its ideal, came from the imposed absence of that "going behind" [crucial to telling], to compass explanations and amplifications, to drag out odds and ends from the "mere" storyteller's great property-shop of aids to illusion: a resource under denial of which it was equally perplexing and delightful, for a change, to proceed. *Everything, for that matter, becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind.* "Kinds" are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency. I myself have scarcely to plead the cause of "going behind", which is right and beautiful and fruitful in its place and order; but as the confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values, so to renounce that

line utterly and do something quite different instead may become in another connexion the true course and the vehicle of effect. [ital. mine, SEL]

James' attempt to make his own work a theoretical enterprise shows, first of all, the fundamental theoretical perspective of the fact that no phenomenon - fabricated phenomenon one should add - can get around to 'consider the law of its kind', as James has it. Second, the quote reveals two ways in which a kind may be used. A kind may be a category of *production*, a model to be followed or contested in view of the effect to be reached. In mixing recognized potentials of two genres James is doing both, in order to avoid the simple "going behind", that is the explanatory and informative framework of an authoritative narrator. However, a kind is also an category of *interpretation*, including all objects, not only works of art or human production, but any object we perceive as an appearance - by James just vaguely referred to as 'everything, for that matter'.

In setting up an opposition between production and interpretation in this way, James is in line with a phenomenology that also deals with appearances, for instance Alfred Schütz (Schütz 1955). Taking for granted that perception and interpretation are inseparable activities of the mind, he claims that its basic acitivity is the 'pairing' or 'coupling' of phenomena. We perceive and identify a phenomenon in one move by holding it up against another phenomenon - perhaps imagined - that is similar to it or different from it. If the phenomenon is observed in complete isolation and even if it is not recognizable or delimitable at once, we 'pair' or 'couple' it with a suggested kind we abductively suppose it belongs to: 'I don't know what this is, but it is most likely that it is some kind of X.' This is the exercise of Schütz' socalled apperceptual schema.

Schütz' next schema involved in the process of perception and identification has been borrowed from Husserl. It is the appresentational schema by which we tentatively place an apperceptually defined object in space: we see a surface, as for example a façade, but see it as a house. We add what is behind the facade from the implications we draw from its suggested kind, the façade of a house. (Schütz introduces two more schemas of no relevance here).

When we are confronted with literary texts, both the productive use and the interpretative function is related to the 'kind' called the literary genre . James holds that kinds in this sense are most fruitfully made use of - they have their 'full effect', he says - when the works of art do not entirely respect the set standards of the genre, because by disconnecting themselves partly from a genre, its standards will have to be articulated anew both by writer and reader who will have actively to take a stand to the 'perplexity' of the work. They are activitated in being challenged and thereby perhaps altered. But in touching upon this oblique use of genres, James introduces - discretely as usual - a dichotomy embracing both the productive and interpretative aspect of kinds.

On the one hand, genres are not seen as merely prescriptive formula to be followed to the last detail, but as media that make it possible for us to communicate on a common ground even when we communicate through a new object never seen before, never existing before - as readers and writers we sink with James 'deep into its consistency'. Like in most modern non-classificatory genre theory, James also refers to genre as a pragmatic or communicative framework: it allows for mutual understanding of what a certain phenomenon is - a novel etc. - which then opens for certain projective expectations for the reader that, fulfilled or not, make reading an ongoing process. Kind as literary genre is a communicative category (cf. Fowler 1982). *Communication* is the first pole of James' second dichotomy.

On the other hand, James also lets us know that basic aesthetic and ethical values are part of the problem of kinds. Kind as an ideological catgory, bordering on aesthetic and social values, refers to kinds as canonical types, foregrounding not only novels but novels of a highly appreciated kind or, alternatively, contesting the canonical character of certain typical novels. Any genre is a potential canonical standard. Kind as *canon* is a ideological category - the second pole of James' second dichotomy.

The flexible communicability is opposed to the normative canonicity, both poles having a productive and an interpretative aspect. Kinds are the dynamic theoretical center of James' fiction.

If we link this last dichotomy to the first one - on production and interpretation - and if we maintain that the relation to kinds is always present in works of art (and in other works as well), and,

finally, if we hold that a more or less radical questioning of both its typologizing and its canonical effect is the key to understand the dynamics of literary works, then James is brought close to Bakhtine (Bakhtine 1981: 3):

> Of all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading. But of critical importance here is the fact that the novel has no canon of its own, as do other genres; only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such.

Although Bakhtine may go too far here, his point that the novel is a text in search of its form and thereby opens for a theory that form as part of the textuality of the novel is a point of general importance for literary works.

Jean Racine: Theory in a Kind
If we follow the above reflections, derived from the James preface, the corrolary is that any fictional text will, as an essential feature of its nature as a text, contain a theory of its kind - its communicative and maybe also its ideological kind, whether looked upon from the point of view of production or interpretation. Thus, the inherent theory of its kind is crucial for the processual character of a text. Even in case that any trace of theory is effaced or any fragment of theoretical nature is contradicted, debunked, carnivalized etc., the text still works in 'considering' - as James says - its kind and it unfolds as a specimen of its kind in 'bestriding' it and, *ipso facto*, also its canonical potential. The work imposes theory upon us in opening the gap between the work of the one hand and the genre and the canon on the other.

I'll look into this minimal theoretical level, as we may call it, in Jean Racine's *Phèdre* from 1677, seeing how this celebrated pitch of French classical tragedy that has been turned into a canonical tragedy a long time ago, operates as a text that challenges the basic features of the genre and its canonical potential and thereby opening theoretical questions: what does it mean to be a tragedy? What does it mean to defend aesthetic and ethical values?

The doctrine of French classical tragedy is inherited from Aristotle's *Poetics* (332BC), channeled through Horace's Pisonian

letters on *ars poetica* (14AD) and summed up in canonical terms, after some intermediary stages, in Nicolas Boileau's *L'Art poétique* (1674). It is well known that a genuine tragedy, apart from respecting the Alexandrene meter and the division in five acts, will have to respect the unity of time, place and action and the principles of *le vraisemblable* in relation to human passions, motifs and actions, and *la bienséance*, that is, the socially acceptable distinction between what can and cannot be shown and talked about in public, ultimately refering to a pre-modern code of honor. As Norbert Elias, among others, has amply shown, *la bienséance* - or *les bienséances* - comprises far more than superficial behavior; it touches upon our conceptions of and approach to the basic constitutive factors of our entire cultural environment: body, mind, social relations, etc. (Elias 1997). Here - as elsewhere, I would claim - the basic features of a kind refer to four functional levels of the text:

- textual form (meter, division of acts, the three unities),
- semantics (verisimilitude in the account of heroic passion and suffering),
- communication (norms for public speech and visibility),
- cultural context (habits for interrelation of motifs and actions)

Like Euripides, towering behind Racine's *Phèdre*, Racine was placed on the edge of the cultural elite, writing for it in impeccable form but also with a disturbing skepticism. Whether he is canonical or not is a question already posited in his own day. But his afterlife in French elitist culture has shown that he came to belong to the core of its literary canon (cf. Truchet 1997).

However, the drama breaks up the genre structure in several respects. First, the basic theme of the drama makes the *bienséance*, or the socially acceptable, only an element of dramatic tension, not an overall ideological umbrella. Illicit love and illicit talk - incest and lie - are the dramatic driving forces. To paraphrase briefly: Phèdre is secretely in love with her stepson Hippolyte in the house of her husband and his father, Thésée, the monster slayer who killed Minotaurus. The entire household is exiled from Athens into the land of Troezen. Hippolyte is not in love with Phèdre, but with Aricie. However, Phèdre claims falsely and therefore dishonorably to Hippolyte's father that she is innoncent and Hippolyte is the one

urged by incestuous impulses. Hippolyte must hide the truth and maybe lie in order to save his stepmother's honour. The plot develops as a tension between lie and truth, revelation and hiding, honor and dishonor, illicit passion and acceptable love, repeating and, at the same time, disrupting the relation between what can and what cannot be shown that makes up the *bienséance*.

The tragedy is a transparent veil making us focus on exactly that which is not supposed to be said or shown and which, therefore, always is just on the tip of the tongue, eye and mind of everyone. The implementation of the feature of *beinséance* does not confirm it, but raises unavoidably disturbing theory-initiating questions in the audience: Can one discus the basic conditions of passions and communication without breaking away from the *bienséance*? Would compliance to the *bienséance* in itself be a lie inside or outside the drama? Racine's own claim of having made his tragedy more 'raisonable' and less 'odieux' than the classics seems almost self-defeating in view of the reality of his text (Racine 1960: 540).

If the *bienséance* is one basic feature of the tragic genre, the very first line of the drama refers to and transgresses another feature. Hippolyte is addressing his servant Théramène. His father Thésée is away, perhaps dead:

> It is resolved, Theramenes. I go.
> I will depart from Troezen's pleasant land.
> Torn by uncertainty about the King,
> I am ashamed of standing idly by.
>
> [Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théramène,
> Et quitte le séjour de l'amble Trézène.
> Dans le doute mortel dont je suis agité,
> Je commence à rougir de mon oisivité.]

Here, in the first line, the plot is initiated by Hippolyte's throwing doubt on the unity of place. The home, pleasant or not, is not a home, not the right place, but when Hippolyte wants to leave it, he is heading for an even more unsecure, unstable and unknown, even unknowable location. He wants to find his missing father, he claims, but this search is only the surface hiding a deeper search: like his

father he wants (v. 79, v. 95-100) to find some monster to fight and kill, only he does not know exactly where to test his skills. He leaves a wrong place in search for a non-place. In a play complying with the unity of place - we remain throughout the tragedy in the royal residence - the placelessness is actually more pronounced than the place. The place not known and not found is what determines the characters and their destiny. The unity of place, constitutive of the genre, is only brought into play in being contested.

However, at the end of the day Hippolyte finds his monster, or rather, it finds him. When Thésée, back in his castle, learns from Phèdre that Hippolyte is courting his stepmother against all human and celestial laws, he believes this to be a lie. He calls upon his father, the seagod Neptune, and urges him to perform his revenge on Hippolyte. And so he does by sending a bull-like seamonster to kill Hippolyte. Hippolyte overcomes the monster, not in killing it but by forgiving his father. Before Hyppolite dies he makes Thésée promise to take care of his loved-one, Aricie, as a daughter. He is, in his own way, an even greater monsterfighter than his father in also overcoming his father's hatred, an aspect of Thésée's monsterdefeating passion. This symmetry between father and son, revealed through the deadly consequences of the tragic *hamartia* of their actions and between beginning and ending embedded in tragic irony, is, in fact, the perfection of the unity of action of a tragedy.

However, like the unity of place, the unity of action also unveils its fractures. A countermovement takes place through the very use of the word 'monster' or 'monstruos' that undermines the tragic purity of the symmetry between Hippolyte's opening search for the monster and his final confrontation with it and the noble way in which he makes the monstruos disappear through his forgiveness. In fact, the monster remains.

What happens throughout the tragedy is that the term 'monster' is used by or about all characters - 13 times - producing in the end a new meaning of the monstruos: it no longer becomes a sign from the gods, a 'demonstration' located outside the human sphere and signaling a transgression of a godgiven norm constituting the canonical social behavior - the prohibition of incest. The monster stands out as a phenomenon produced by humans in their mutual social interaction in such a way that it cannot be overcome. The very notion of the *vraisemblable* and the *bienséance* is at stake.

After Hippolyte's reference in the first act, repeated in the third act (v. 938), to the classical monster he wants to kill in order to raise to the heroic level of Thésée, Phèdre refers to the monster in the second act to lure and seduce Hippolyte (vv. 649, 701, 703). 'You do not need the monster to show you are brave, she says, because I know that had you met the Minotaurus, you would have killed him - *par vous aurait péri le monstre de la Crète* - and I could have been your saving angel in stead of Ariadne.' Here, the killing of the monster is a hypothesis and hence a rhetorical construct, not a reference to the actual deed. Once this arbitrariness is established, the ground is laid for new rhetorical constructs. Phèdre calls herself a monster because of her illicit and passionate love. So, if he had killed her, Hippolyte could be a true monster-slayer.

In act III, the traditional core of the five act tragedy, Phèdre changes tactics and accuses Hippolyte of being a monster (v. 884), not because she loves him less or he is a prince turned into a toad, but because he arouses monstruos feelings in her. He is a monster because he has a mental effect on others that is felt by them as monstruos. The sentimental reaction to an object is more important than the intrinsic or actual character of the object. The drama has now opened the gates for a free floating sentimental relativism - post-modernism in the age of pre-modernism.

Also Thésée now enters the relativism of monstruosity (v. 963, 970). Upon his return, his entire value system is turned upside down. His family reacts to him as if he were a monster: his son wants to escape, his wife hides from him and people try to distance themselves from him. By their behavior he is reminded of the reaction he himself had toward the monsters he has fought. Or, on the contrary, are they monsters afraid to appear in front of him? No answer. From the end of act III, as Jean-Louis Barrault remarks in the instructive report on his staging of Phèdre in 1946, there is no order in Thésée's house but only a series of explosions (Barrault 1994: 214). Now the truly monstruos being an objectless fear or angst, the uncanny and undefinable space separating himself from his loved ones, he is longing back to face the real monsters. Those who, at least, considered their kind.

In act IV Thésée tries to annihilate this evil power of the open-ended monstruousity in trying to close in on a palpable monstruos object: Hippolyte is a monster (v. 1045). Phèdre's rhetorical

maneuver has entered social reality - Foucauldian insights anticipated. She regrets the effects of her intrigues but is no longer able to turn the tables. Instead she curses her nurse Œnone as a monster, because it was her who in the first place came up with the idea the Phèdre should lie to Thésée about Hippolyte's feeling. Needless to say, the two ladies die in due time. Once brought into play, nobody can avoid being touched by the monstrous. It lives its own uncontrollable, irascible and indelible life, leading Thésée to call upon Neptune's seamonster to kill Hippolyte (v. 1516).

But before that point, Aricie, the humble mistress of Hippolyte, unexpectedly takes the front and scorns Thésée, telling him that undoubtedly he has killed numerous monsters. But he has left one. She does not specify which one, and the monstruos objectlessness has now returned to Thésée. And as we know from St. Luke (11, 24-26) the evil spirit chasen away is worse when it returns, accompanied as it is by seven evil spirits. Thésée guesses madly by himself what Aricie meant: is the monster Hippolyte, is it himself, is it the seamonster - or is it, as revealed in the end, the whole fabric of lie, deceit, intrigue and passion ruling their lives and triggering the fatal series of events. The monstruos is produced by the unavoidable angst people have for their identities and their passions, and is therefore unavoidable itself. The monstruos is a way of constructing identities that ultimately destroys the characters. Here is no unity of action, but a fight against the monstruos that disrupts the unity of place and time of the tragedy, and thereby the easy relation of a text to its kind. Its theoretical implications is that it forces us to reconsider this relaton.

Theory is practice
Racine's *Phèdre* is not a tragedy because it confirms the basic constitutive features of its genre and its canonical potential, but because it calls them into question. Of course, Racine does write a tragedy. But in doing so, he first of all outlines its borders thereby opening for a theoretical reflection on the nature and function of tragedy through the textual process itself, on the levels of form, semantics, communication, and contextualization. But he does not present a new *art poétique*.

In rewriting the Phèdre-motif, Racine makes his tragedy an actual part of cultural history, both in relaton to the past - as he

emphasizes himself in his preface although from a different angle -, to his contemporary cultural context, and to cultural history after him that continuously struggles with the position of his text in terms of canonization and interpretation (cf. for example, Hunger 1959: s.v., Brunel 1988: s.v., Schlegel 1972, Thruchet 1997, Barrault 1994). Theory is most efficient as practice and as fiction, that is is to say when an overview is not given but required in order for us to take issue with these questions: Is *Phèdre* still an actual - in the broadest possible sense - work of art and why? To place theory in literature makes this questioning unavoidable, and to focus on works like *Phèdre* makes it impossible to close the case once and for all. Therefore it keeps theory alive and kicking.

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