

Sink or Swim: On Associative Structuring in Longer Latvian Folksongs

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The oral tradition of Latvian lyrical folksongs, or *dainas*, began to be recorded at the beginning of the last century and is currently available in both the printed and the electronic media. These songs are in octosyllabic blank verse divided by a caesura, and the overwhelming majority of them follow a trochaic meter, the rest being dactylic.¹ The classical source is the collection of 217,996 text versions classified and published by Krišjānis Barons (Barons and Visendorfs 1894-1915), in which a “song” is typically presented as a brief, epigrammatic quatrain unit, with barely 10% of the material consisting of texts longer than eight lines. The same system of text identification was adopted in the supplement to this corpus published by Peāteris Šmits (1936-39) and in the Daina Data Base (1982), a transcription of a 12-volume collection incorporating the essential elements of both these primary sources (Švābe et al. 1952-56). A major, up-to-date collection aiming to represent the approximately one million text versions deposited in the Latvian Archives of Folklore has been for many years a major undertaking at the Language and Folklore Institute of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, and six of the planned volumes have been published so far, each accounting for a corpus of some 70,000 text versions (Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmija 1979-93).

Ever since Barons’ monumental work established the quatrain as the canonical text unit in the Latvian *dainas*—a unit that exhibits both metrical and semantic unity—very little attention has been paid to the manner in which quatrains follow each other in actual song performances. The first and most obvious reason for this is that Barons made the editorial decision to cut up longer strings of text that seemed to have little compositional unity in order to class them under the same identification number with other texts having roughly the same content.² This allowed him to publish vast

¹ See Vīķis-Freibergs 1981 for additional details.

² See Arājs 1985 for details on Barons’ principles of classification and redaction.

quantities of materials within the frame of his thematic-functional system of classification with remarkable economy of space but also had the unfortunate result of obliterating much of the information on how the texts might have been organized and retrieved in the memory of any particular singer. It should be noted in Barons' defense, however, that even among the longer texts that he did publish in full, signs of clear compositional structure are by no means always easy to discern. The same can be said of the longer song texts recorded by various collectors of folk melodies, such as Emīlis Melngailis (1951-53).

The very notion of composition presumes the presence of deliberate, more or less artistically inclined intent in a song's construction, an intent that may be more or less successfully realized in the final product, and which may be more or less readily discernible as laws or principles according to which various elements of the whole relate to each other. While the degree of artistic achievement lies largely in the eyes of the beholder (or the ears of the listener) and depends entirely on the fashions of the day and the types of aesthetic canons involved, the degree of lawfulness, system, and method in a song's textual cohesion may be considered as a problem in cognitive organization and is therefore amenable to analysis from that point of view. Since a song, just like spoken language, represents a sequence of elements following each other along a temporal dimension, the principles of its composition should be revealed by examining the rules and regularities that govern the sequentiality of its component functional elements.

One form of composition, which forms the very core of epic but is much less frequent in lyrical materials, is the narrative sequence, in which a coherent unfolding of events is presented, frequently from the point of view of one privileged protagonist or "hero." Such narrative songs are relatively rare among the *dainas*, being largely confined to the thematic cycles of courting and wedding songs,³ or to what have been termed "folk romances" (*tautas romances*).⁴ Even there, however, completely developed narrative structures with a full sequence of exposition, development, climax, and conclusion are the exception rather than the rule. More frequently encountered are songs presenting mere narrative episodes or situations (Ligere 1977:114), or, again, narrative or pseudo-narrative structures in which the plot is relatively weakly developed.⁵ More frequent still in the

³ See Barons and Visendorfs 1904, 1905, 1909: vol. III, tomes 1, 2, and 3.

⁴ See further Bērzkalne 1942, Ligere 1977, Ozols 1968.

⁵ See further Jaremko 1989; Reynolds 1989; Vīkis-Freibergs 1989c, 1992b, 1996.

Latvian tradition are songs that might be said to represent the “degree zero” of narrative structuring. These are strings of stanzas in which nothing much happens in the way of either plot or character development and in which the principles governing stanza sequentiality are frequently far from evident. These so-called “strings of songs” (*dziesmu virknes*) have been considered by Ozols (1968:228) as a transitional form between the shorter and the “longer songs” proper (“longer songs” presumably being those evincing recognizable principles of composition). As their name implies, such strings might represent, at the limit, nothing more than a purely mechanical concatenation of various song fragments (Ligere 1977). Or, as G. F. Stender the Elder put it in the 1783 edition of his *Lettische Grammatik* (quoted in Bērziņš 1932:31; see also Arājs 1985):

Einige lettische Nationallieder continuiren in der angefangenen Materie, so wie es die Phantasie hinter einander eingegeben. Diese werden besonders Singes genannt. . . .⁶

In such a limiting case of zero structuring, each successive text unit would appear to be drawn at random from a singer’s total repertoire, this repertoire in turn possessing about as much internal organization as a bag of marbles. The performance of such a song would thus amount to shaking up the bag and then blindly pulling out one stanza after another at random.

The argument of the present paper is that stanza sequencing in longer songs is never completely random and that some principles of internal cohesion and structuring are at work even in the most loosely organized strings of texts. While in the Latvian materials the degree of internal structuring may be quite variable, even the least structured text will show association with some common theme or motif. Song composition based on *association as a principle of textual cohesion* will be demonstrated here by analyzing one particular song text in detail. The text presented was chosen because it fulfills two requirements: considerable length and a minimal degree of overall composition (in the traditional sense of that term).

Our first step will be to clarify what we consider to be the major functional elements of text composition in the longer *dainas*—couplets and modules—and to set forth the rules by which song texts may be segmented into such units. Next, we will sketch a brief theoretical outline of how these functional units of oral lyrical texts are organized within a hierarchical system of symbolic representation. Accepting our sample text as

⁶ “Some Latvian national songs may continue on the same theme in whichever way the imagination may place one after another. These especially are called *ziņģes* . . .”

representative of associative songs as a type, we shall then look for elements in it that contribute to textual coherence between one stanza and the next, and endeavor to discover what makes even the simplest of songs an object of deliberate creation rather than the result of blindly random processes. Following the actual text analysis, we shall return to the question of just how longer non-narrative songs may be composed according to the principle of association and, finally, offer some additional theoretical considerations.

Text Segmentation and the Hierarchical Organization of Songs

The principles by which a text is to be segmented into functional units need to be clarified before we look for any laws of composition or of combinatorics operating between them. While the quatrain has been generally accepted since Barons' time as the basic semantic unit in the Latvian *dainas*, it should be emphasized that, in the case of longer songs, the line couplet is actually the basic functional unit or stanza. This distinction was already noted by Bērziņš (1932), who attributes the couplet strophe to the longer songs (for which he keeps the somewhat pejorative term *ziņģes*, introduced by Stenders in the eighteenth century). The line couplet is a segment of text making up one complete grammatical sentence as well as the segment usually carried by one repetition of the melody (which usually also includes a repetition of all or part of the text and/or a refrain).

Line couplets, in turn, are organized into larger text units that for lack of a more imaginative term I have termed modules (Vīkīs-Freibergs 1989c, 1992b). A module may be defined as a unit of text that is usually but not necessarily larger than a single couplet,⁷ possesses thematic (i.e. deep-semantic) unity and is expressed through either identical or closely similar poetic imagery. A further criterion is that a module should be found to recur elsewhere in a representative corpus of *dainas*, either as a single isolated unit—such as the typical quatrain of the Barons collection— or in different distributional contexts in other longer songs. In the case of narrative songs, a module may be considered a special case of what Lord

⁷ It happens that the thematic modules found in Latvian longer songs are quite frequently only two couplets long; that is, they are of the scope of the traditional “Barons’ quatrain.” Nevertheless, a module is definitely not just a quatrain under another name, since modules consisting of a single couplet, a three-stanza sextet, or even longer passages of text are also possible in the Latvian *daina* tradition (Vīkīs-Freibergs 1989c).

whole first module in mind, the general semantic content of which would then be progressively decoded into couplet stanzas, one after the other. On reaching the end of the first module, the singer now has to gain mental access to the global semantic content of the second module, and this in turn would now be decoded into its component stanzas. The same process would then continue for each successive module until the end of the song was reached. There are thus two successive steps at which a more abstract content has to be translated into a more concrete one, a process that helps to explain the wide variation in concrete expression that is a hallmark of oral traditions. The actual generation of a specific sequence of words for any one particular song version will be guided both by the metrical constraints of the *daina* stanza and its traditional sentence frames, style, and diction, and will include recourse to such stanza structuring devices as parallelism, similarity, and contrast (Vīkīs-Freibergs 1994b, forthcoming). For all intents and purposes then, a lyrical song has to be generated anew each time it is performed, just like the epic (Lord 1960; Foley 1976, 1991)—not generated *ex nihilo*, of course, but from a given repertoire of traditional elements structured according to traditional rules. The same basic processes would account for the variations produced by the same singer at different times, or by different singers within the same tradition.

Material to Be Analyzed and Text Segmentation

Keeping in mind the requirements of length, of a “degree zero” of narrative structure, and of an associative type of thematic unity, a song consisting of eighteen two-line stanzas was chosen to be analyzed in detail. This text, which we shall call “The Stone in the River,” has been published as song No. 656 in E. Melngailis’ collection of melodies from Kurzeme (1951:1.227). More specifically, it comes from the districts of Bārta and Nīca in southwestern Kurzeme, not far from the Lithuanian border. All that is known about the text is that it is one of two songs transmitted by V. Dārznieks to Melngailis, who did some editing on the melodies but not on the texts. I have been unable to find any other longer song that might be considered a direct variant of this particular text. In terms of subgenre, it belongs to the broad category of courting and wedding songs. The song has been republished by Vītoliņš in his large compendium of melodies of Latvian courting songs, where it has been classed among a handful of other “Miscellaneous” songs (1986:554). More specifically, I would classify it within a special subgenre of “maiden songs,” prenuptial songs sung from the woman’s point of view, which are stylistically and thematically quite

distinct from the male “suitor’s songs,” where the “lyrical I” is a young man who “rides off in search of a wife.”⁸

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1. U - pi - te - i o - lu me - tu, u - pe o - lu ne - pa - ne - sa, Ai rai - ri - ri - di ral - la - la - di, u - pe o - lu ne - pa - nes.

1st line of text 2nd line of text Refrain 2nd line repeated

As a first step in our analysis, the eighteen couplet stanzas of this lyrical song are segmented into seven independent thematic *modules*. For the convenience of the reader, the text of each module will be presented just before the analysis of that particular song fragment.

All seven of the “Stone in the River” modules are widely attested as independent short songs elsewhere in the *daina* corpus, and Table 1 below presents a quantitative overview of each module’s distribution, that is, of the total number of its recorded versions. The corpus searched included the computerized Daina Data Base (1982) of 71,000 texts, and additional variants and subvariants were retrieved by hand from the 217,996 text versions published in Barons and Visendorfs.⁹ This was done by adding up all the regional codes listed there under each type-song, its numbered variants, and unnumbered subvariants.¹⁰ Most of these other versions of our seven modules were also recorded in Kurzeme, the western part of Latvia, so that this entire body of material attests to a strongly regionalized component in the Latvian *daina* tradition. The search also covered the corpus of songs from Kurzeme in the Melngailis collection, where a few of the “Stone in the River” modules do appear as parts of other longer songs.

⁸ On prenuptial songs sung from a young man’s point of view, see Viķis-Freibergs 1989c, 1996.

⁹ A complete computer-accessible transcription of this corpus has recently been completed as a joint project between the University of Latvia and the Latvian Academy of Science. The data base is expected to become operational in the not-too-distant future.

¹⁰ For further details on the system of *daina* text identification and classification, see Arājs 1985; Viķis-Freibergs 1989a, 1992a.

Table 1: Recurrences of text modules from “The Stone in the River” elsewhere in the *daina* corpus

Module sequence number	Total number of recorded versions
1	45
2	153
3	82
4	57
5	5 [78]
6	65
7	88

Three of the seven modules of the “Stone in the River” song consist of a classical *daina* quatrain, usually built on strong principles of parallelism. As will become apparent in the analysis to follow, the *syntagmatic* relationship between pairs of consecutive couplets *within* each module is based on two main classes of semantic relationships: *similarity* and *contrast*. Two among a number of possible intraquatrain structures are shown in the schemas of Figure 2, where each letter and its prime represent the two closely linked lines of each couplet stanza.

Figure 2: Contrast and similarity as intraquatrain structuring principles

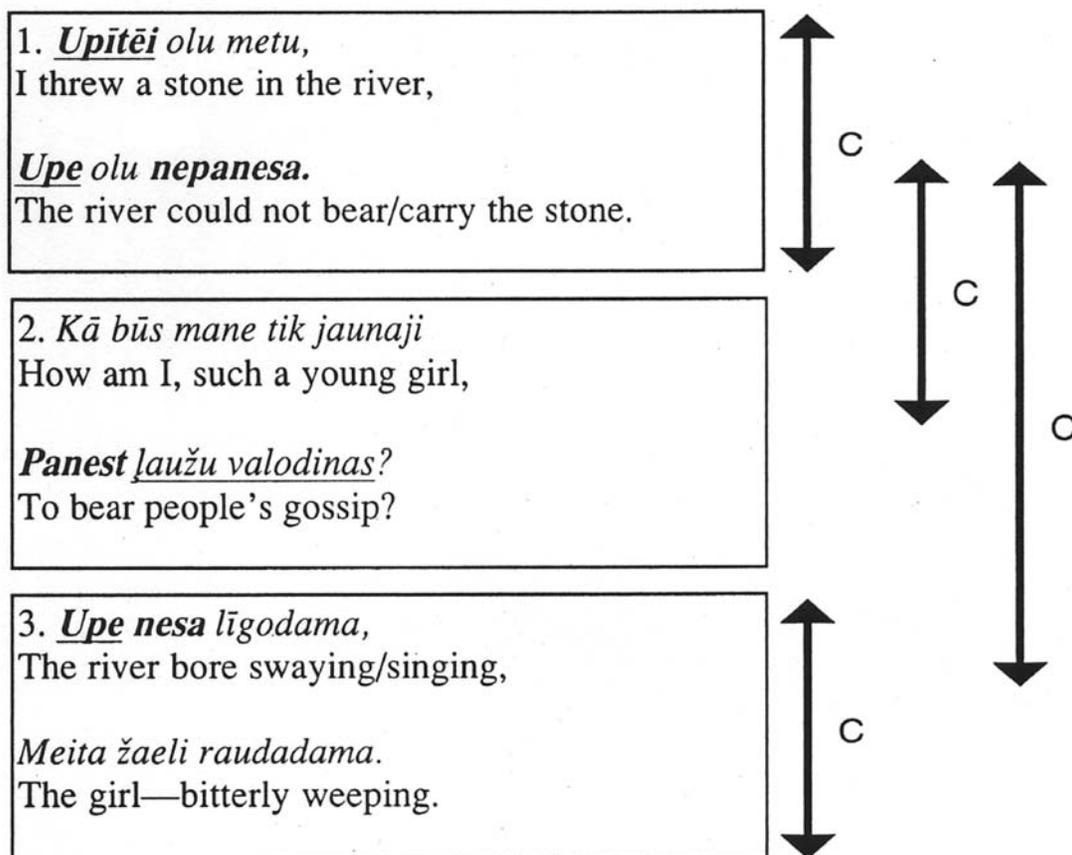
Stanza			Stanza	
1.	A		1.	A
	A'	Thesis		A'
				Thesis 1 (Nature)
2.	B	Contrast	2.	B
	B'	Antithesis		B'
				Similarity
				Thesis 2 (Culture)

Four of the seven modules of the “Stone in the River” song are sextets, that is, a basic quatrain unit followed by a third couplet stanza. In two of the sextet modules (Nos. 6 and 7), the third couplet represents an additional elaboration of the semantic content of the second couplet. In the other two cases (Nos. 1 and 2), the sextet module is in fact a condensation of two separate quatrains each starting with the same couplet, this common couplet being elided rather than repeated. This condensation may be schematically expressed as follows:

Quatrain 1	+	Quatrain 2	----->	Fused Sextet
[AA' + BB']	+	[AA' + CC']	----->	[AA' + BB' + CC']

[Thesis + Antithesis 1]+ [Thesis + Antithesis 2] --->[Thesis + Antithesis 1+ Antithesis 2]

The song as a whole develops the extremely widespread theme of the marriage prospects of unmarried girls and is presented from the viewpoint of the girl herself. It belongs to a substantial subcorpus of songs about the maiden who manages to make a desirable match in spite of being maligned by malicious gossip. While there is no obvious deep-structure compositional schema governing the permissible sequencing of different modules among themselves, they are linked to each other by overlapping *associative* links of similarity or contrast at every level of text representation. At the deep-semantic level, each module reiterates the same core metaphor, which expresses a sharp contrast between social influences that are threatening as well as emotionally harmful and the individual's attempts to counter them with the visualization of their beneficial contraries. Each module reformulates this central theme through a different concrete image, so that a semantic relation of similarity links different modules between themselves, as well as each module to the common theme. In that sense a *paradigmatic* equivalence is established between the deep-semantic content of the different modules. At the same time, associative links of similarity also obtain between various other text features, notably lexical, morphemic, and phonemic similarity or repetition, as will become apparent by examining each of the seven modules in turn.

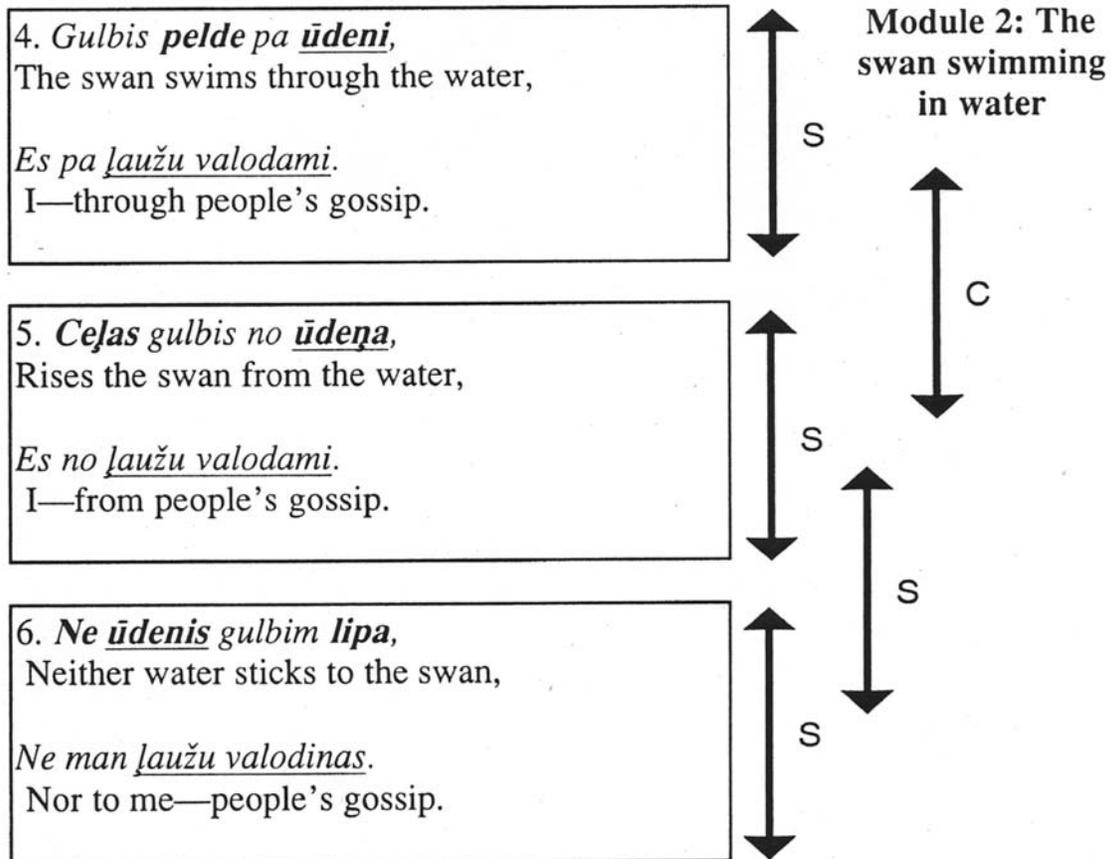
Module 1: The stone thrown into the river¹¹

The first stanza of the first module starts with the vivid, concrete image of a stone thrown into a river and sinking to the bottom, since it is too heavy to float and be carried along by the river. A tendency toward contrasts is thus immediately established in the song. The second couplet poses a rhetorical question that expresses the song's central preoccupation: how is a defenseless young girl to bear malicious gossip, the psychological weight of which is every bit as heavy as a stone in water? This constitutes an implicit contrast with the first stanza: the girl has to bear her psychological burden, since she has no other choice, while the river simply does not carry the stone. These first two stanzas together thus form a classical *daina* quatrain of a type I am terming "horizontal" nature-culture parallelism. A poetic image from the realm of nature, expressed in the first couplet, is followed by an analogous parallel from the realm of culture in the second: the stone is to the river what the gossip is to the girl. The

¹¹ Each labeled vertical arrow, both here and in the shemas that follow, refers to a discrete link of either similarity (S) or contract (C) within a module.

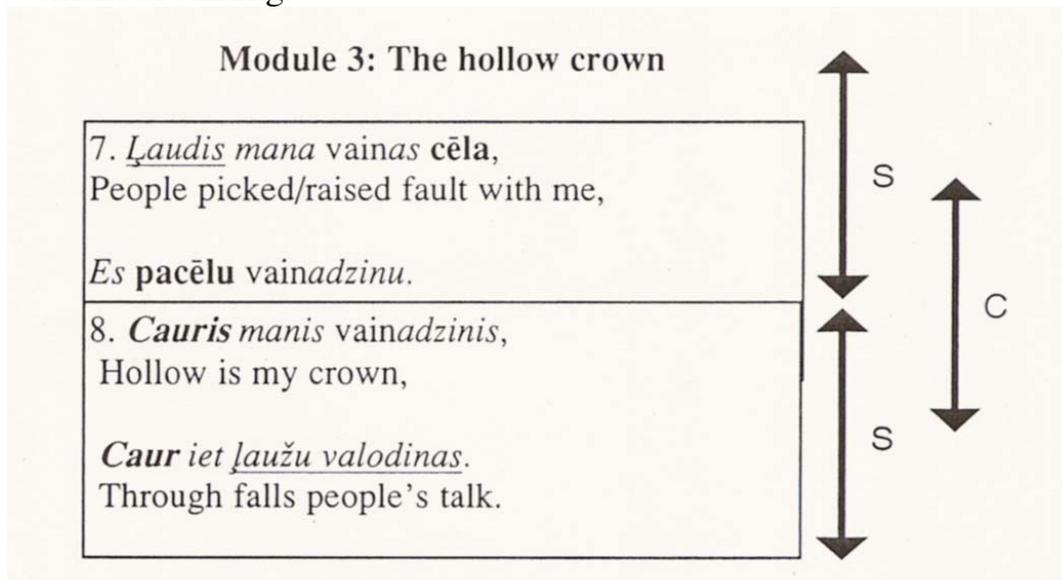
images from these widely distant semantic domains are unified by the common concept of a burden too heavy to be borne.

The third couplet in this module represents an alternative contrast to the first couplet, while at the same time functioning as an elaboration of the second. The river, which according to the first stanza is unable to bear the stone, is now said to carry it along *līgodama*, that is, either singing or swaying or both, but in any case without difficulty. The rhetorical question about the girl's reaction, expressed in the second stanza, is now answered as an explicit negative contrast to the happy-go-lucky river: the girl bears what she must, but with great anguish and bitter tears. This first module thus presents the exposition of the problem: a young maiden sorrowful and bitter under the psychological burden of social condemnation.



The second module reiterates the same central contrast between sinking and swimming, but replaces the word “river” (*upe*) with the more generic word for water (*ūdens*), both words being close equivalents at the level of lexical semantics and starting with the same vowel. While water remains a common feature in both modules, its metaphorical significance has been reversed: from being the figurative analogue of the sorrowful maiden, it now becomes a metaphor for the ceaseless flow of malicious talk. In sharp contrast to the stone that sinks in the river (Module 1), the swan swims through and on the water. By doing so, the swan becomes a direct simile for the maiden who “swims” through the flood of gossip.¹²

A second simile aligns a swan’s taking flight and rising above the water surface with a maiden’s psychologically rising above the harmful influences of other people’s talk. The third maiden-swan simile, in the third stanza, elaborates and reiterates this central idea. The abstract semantic core notion is the importance of rising above adversity, like the swan rises above the water and into the air. The third stanza introduces the important nuance of the maiden’s remaining unscathed and untouched, just like a swan with water rolling off its back; of keeping one’s sense of personal integrity intact even under the stream of cruel talk meant to destroy or damage it. It also develops and makes explicit the dynamic sense of verticality, of a liberating upward movement, which is in direct contrast to the negative downward movement of sinking.



¹² In some Latvian wedding songs the swan may allegorically refer to the bride. The relatives of the bride/swan may address the mere “geese” of the groom’s wedding party with the cry, “Open up [i.e. make way], you flock of geese, let the swan into the room.”

The third module features a startling departure from the earlier water metaphors by introducing the new and unexpected image of the maiden crown, a metonymic symbol of a girl's personal honor and good reputation (apart from its obvious function as a symbol of virginity and of the unmarried state). Here two sets of parallel lines establish a sort of mocking link of similarity between the actions of "people" and those of the "lyrical I." First, there is a punning parallel between the verbal preterite root *ceāl-*, meaning to lift up, to pick up, to raise up in the literal, physical sense—here, the lifting up of the crown, much as one would tip one's hat—and the idiomatic expression for picking fault, *vainu celt* (literally, "to raise fault or faults"). A second pun in the same couplet plays on the phonetic recurrence of the two syllables in *vainas* ("fault," genitive singular, or "faults," nominative plural) as the first two (etymologically unrelated) syllables in the word *vainadzīnu* ("crown," accusative singular). Yet a third pun in this same module plays on the phonetic similarity between *caurs* ("hollow") and *cauri* ("through").

The second stanza of this third module contains another internal simile between the physical hollowness of the maiden crown and the psychological hollowness of people's fault-finding. It has a causal relationship to the first stanza, but also contains an element of contrast, since the flow of talk disappearing through the hollow crown amounts to saying that it causes absolutely no effect, that the "faults" attributed to the girl do not in any way affect that for which her crown symbolically stands. This module is linked to the preceding one through the lexical and phonetic associations of the verb form *cel-*. The forms *cēla* ("raised fault") and *pacēlu* ("I raised up" or "I lifted up") in this module are etymologically and phonetically related to *ceļas* ("rises") in the preceding module, a word that refers to the swan's rising up into the air as it takes flight from the water's surface. The semantic components of these associations amount to playing (or even punning) on the literal, idiomatic, figurative, and symbolic meanings of this family of key words.

Module 4: Wading through the river with stones at the bottom

9. *Droši bridu to upīti,*

Fearlessly did I wade that river,

Zināj'—oļi dibenāi.

I knew—stones are at its bottom.

10. *Droši ņēmu to meitiņu,* ♥

Fearlessly I took that girl,

Zināj' labu tikuminu.

I knew her (to be of) good virtue.



The fourth module returns to the twin images of the stone and the river of Module 1 through a double link of conceptual and lexical association, but this time in a quite different configuration. The stones now lie at the bottom of the river, not as a symbol of sinking under the weight of adversity, but as its very contrary—the safety of wading across a river that has a good, solid stone bottom. In order to make use of this clever twist on the first module, however, the singer is forced to use a human parallel that switches the gender of the “lyrical I” from the persona of the maiden to that of a male suitor. Artistically this makes for a somewhat clumsy break in compositional unity at the surface level, yet the deep-level semantic meaning and the tone fit well with the rest of the song. The young man claims to have no fears or qualms about taking (i.e. marrying) the girl, since he has personal knowledge of her solid character. Implicit in this module, through association with the preceding ones, is the notion that he keeps his faith in the girl’s good virtue in spite of the river of bad talk about her. The metaphorical river of flowing talk is inferred implicitly as a textually unexpressed parallel to the literal river with the stones at its bottom. The second stanza of this module introduces for the first time the explicit mention of a girl being chosen in marriage. This now spells out textually the preoccupation with the effects of social gossip on an unmarried girl’s marriage prospects, effects that constitute a central theme in the song but that until now have only hovered implicitly in the background. The little heart (♥) next to stanza 10 signals the appearance of the marriage theme, a theme that will recur in the next three modules as well.

Module 5: The river full of white blossoms

11. *Pilna upe baltu ziedu,*
The river is full of white blossoms,

*Nedrīkstēju pāri **bristi**.*
I didn't dare wade across.

12. *Tautiets mani žaelodamis,* ♥
My fiancé (suitor), out of pity for me,

Laipā lika zobentiņu.
Laid down his sword for a footbridge.



The full quatrain of this module, starting with the striking and euphonious couplet about the river full of white blossoms (*Pilna upe baltu ziedu*) that a girl does not dare to cross, recurs as such only five times elsewhere in the *daina* corpus. The second couplet alone, on the other hand, about the gallant young man laying down his sword as a footbridge, recurs 78 times, either as an isolated quatrain or as the starting module of a whole cluster of longer songs. In all of these other versions, however, it is always the brother and not the suitor who lays down his sword as a result of his “taking pity” on the girl’s fear. In addition to its Freudian connotations as a symbol of manhood, the sword plays a crucial role in Latvian courting and wedding songs as the prerogative of a free man (as opposed to a serf). In the wedding traditions of some regions of Latvia, the ceremonial removal of the bride’s maiden crown, to be replaced by a married woman’s headgear, was done with the sword of the bridegroom. These connotations create implicit associative links between the suitor’s sword in this module and the maiden’s crown in the third module.

This fifth module is the first in the song in which there are no direct or indirect references to gossip. The image of the river, however, forms a direct associative link with the river of the first module and the water of the second. Conceptually there is a contrast between the fearless taking of the

girl in marriage in the preceding module and the fear of wading expressed in this one. Most importantly, the conceptual contrast between being submerged in water and rising above it returns here as a central theme, but with yet another twist to it. The first couplet explicitly states, “I didn’t dare wade across,” but it is not clear whether this fear is meant literally as a fear of physical danger from the river or as the expression of a taboo against disturbing the white blossoms. At one level, it could be simply a fear of wading across a river full of waterlilies that, pretty though it may be on the surface, is likely to be murky and weed-filled underneath, and where one’s feet would sink into the ooze at the bottom. Yet the word used to express this reticence is not the common *baidījos* (“I feared”) but rather *nedrīkstēju*, which may mean “I dare not,” but also means literally “I was not allowed” or “I was not permitted to.” This evokes for me a personal association with an early, indistinct childhood memory of being told by some woman that “one must not pick the white waterlilies” or that “it is not allowed to pick the white blossoms”—the ones that I wanted—“but you can have the yellow waterlilies,” which I found much less pretty. This would suggest that the white blossoms were taboo,¹³ possibly as a reminiscence of earlier times when they might have been sacred to a deity. At a symbolic level, then, the text might reflect a fear of committing sacrilege. While I have found no direct evidence that this is so, the appearance of the goddess Laima in the following module might possibly be the result of such an implicit association.

Whatever its presumed source, the somewhat vague fear expressed in the first couplet is assuaged by the protective and caring gesture of a young man who, just like Lord Raleigh for Queen Elizabeth I, places a precious possession under her feet. (“Precious is my sword /More of gold than of silver” is the next stanza in a related song.) This fifth module thus presents a double contrast to the feelings and images evoked in the introductory module. First, on the physical plane, the image of the footbridge (*laipa*), of crossing dry-footed in contrast to sinking or wading in water, creates a sense of safety and escape, of rising above something that is potentially threatening. Second, on the social plane, the striking (but not particularly

¹³ The color white, by the way, is the most frequently mentioned color in the *dainas*, and it carries strong metonymic connotations of brightness, purity, honor, and virtue. It has definite associations with the sacred in general and with various divinities in particular (see also Mauriņa 1968; Vīkis-Freibergs 1980, 1989b). Thus the mythological Sun may be addressed as “Oh, little Sun, dear, white;” the Mother of Shades sits “white on the hill of white clover, her hand full of white flowers;” and the goddess Laima is sometimes referred to as “a white guest who comes in the evening.”

realistic) image of the sword as a footbridge evokes the girl's feeling of being cherished and protected by her suitor, which is in stark contrast with the sense of being attacked, denigrated, and threatened by society at large. Finally, the footbridge is an implicit metonymic symbol for the successful passage from maidenhood to the married state. Thus a poor girl being courted by a young man of a great and distinguished family might exclaim in despair (song no. 15444 var. 1)¹⁴:

*Plata upe, šaura laipa,
Kā bij man pāri tikt?
Lielas tautas, mazs pūriņš,
Kā bij man sadereāt?*

Wide the river, narrow the footbridge,
How am I to get across?
Great his family, small my dowry,
How am I to get engaged?

Module 6. The goddess Laima—drowned or sitting on a hilltop

13. *Ļaudis teica manu laimi*
The people said that my Luck/Fortune

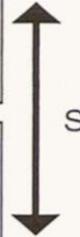
Ūdenī noslīkušu.
Had drowned in water.

14. *Mana Laimē kalniņāi*
My Luck on the hilltop

Pin sudraba vijuminu.
Twines a silver cord.

15. *Izpinusi vijuminu* ♡
Having twined her twining,

Pin pie balta tautudaela.
Binds (twines) me to a white father's son.



¹⁴ Barons and Visendorfs 1894-1915: vol. III, tome 1.

The sixth module starts with a couplet that returns to the theme of “people” saying bad things about one, as well as to the image of water in its threatening and engulfing sense. Specifically, the people are saying that one’s *laime*, that is, one’s personal fate and fortune, decreed at birth by Laima, the goddess of fate and fortune, has “drowned in water.”¹⁵ This is a formulaic expression widespread in the *daina* corpus, a dramatic metonym for a life destined by fate to be unlucky and unhappy. Implicit in this couplet is the superstitious fear that people will actually cause such bad luck by formulating it in words and, possibly, by wishing for it too.¹⁶

The second couplet represents a direct contrast to the first, and the third presents a specific elaboration of the general principle expressed in the second. To counteract the threatening image of Laima drowning in water, the next couplet seeks her maximum elevation on the vertical plane by placing her on a hilltop—most likely the hill of heaven, the abode of the gods. This then is yet another variation on the central “sink or swim” theme. It is reminiscent of the swan of the second module rising up from the water and taking flight toward the heavens, as well as of the more pedestrian image of the maiden crown being raised up. The image of Laima drowning recalls the metaphorical analogy with the girl’s reputation and honor being “drowned” in the waters of malicious gossip. Its contrast, Laima sitting on a hilltop, is a widespread motif in the *dainas*, as is the image of Laima associated with something made of silver as a sign of her being favorably disposed.

The last stanza spells out directly the kind of good luck that Laima is actually fashioning—it is a silver cord to bind the fate of the talked-about girl to a “white father’s son”: a wellborn young man of good family, good material prospects, good character, and pleasant appearance, all implicitly wrapped up in one formulaic package. In the face of her lack of moral support and even ill will and ill wishes from the social world she lives in, the singer is seeking solace in her deep faith that the goddess of Fate will set things right in the end. Whatever others are saying, she concentrates on the image of her personal Laima not merely as safe and sound but as exalted, and looking after her interests at this very moment by twining the silver cord.

¹⁵ On Laima, see also Biezais 1955, Gimbutas 1989, Vīkis-Freibergs 1989b.

¹⁶ This belief is implied in the Latvian word *pierunāt* (to cause to happen by talking about it) or the expression *piesaukt nelaimi* (to “call out” misfortune by naming the thing feared).

Module 7: The resplendent blooming of the wind-broken apple tree

<p>16. <i>Raedz, kā koši noziedēja</i> Behold, how brightly/richly bloomed</p> <p><i>Vēja lauzta ābelīte</i> The wind-broken apple tree.</p>	
<p>17. <i>Raedz, ka koši izprecēja</i> ♥ Behold, the bright/rich match made by</p> <p><i>Vainojamu matesmeitu.</i> The disparaged mother's daughter.</p>	
<p>18. <i>Vaino sivu, vaino dzedru,</i> <i>They disparage/blame her as sharp, as cold,</i></p> <p><i>Vaino darbu nemākošu.</i> <i>They disparage her as inept at work.</i></p>	

A new image is introduced in the seventh and final module: the contrast between the poor prospects of a wind-broken apple tree and its remarkable bursting forth in abundant and beautiful bloom. Since elsewhere in the *dainas* apple trees always “bloom with white blossoms,” this image does not arise at random, but rather through a co-textually motivated associative link with the “white blossoms” of Module 5, as well as with the implicit whiteness of the swan in Module 2. In the first couplet, the internal contrast from the realm of nature is followed by a direct parallel from the human sphere, as the “mother’s daughter” with apparently poor prospects, the one whom everybody disparages, manages to make a brilliant match nonetheless. The third and last couplet of the module merely elaborates the second by spelling out the kinds of faults that people have been ascribing to the girl. These faults—a sharp temper, a cold personality, and ineptitude in all the skills that constitute women’s work—are clearly of a kind to strike fear in the breast of any prospective husband.

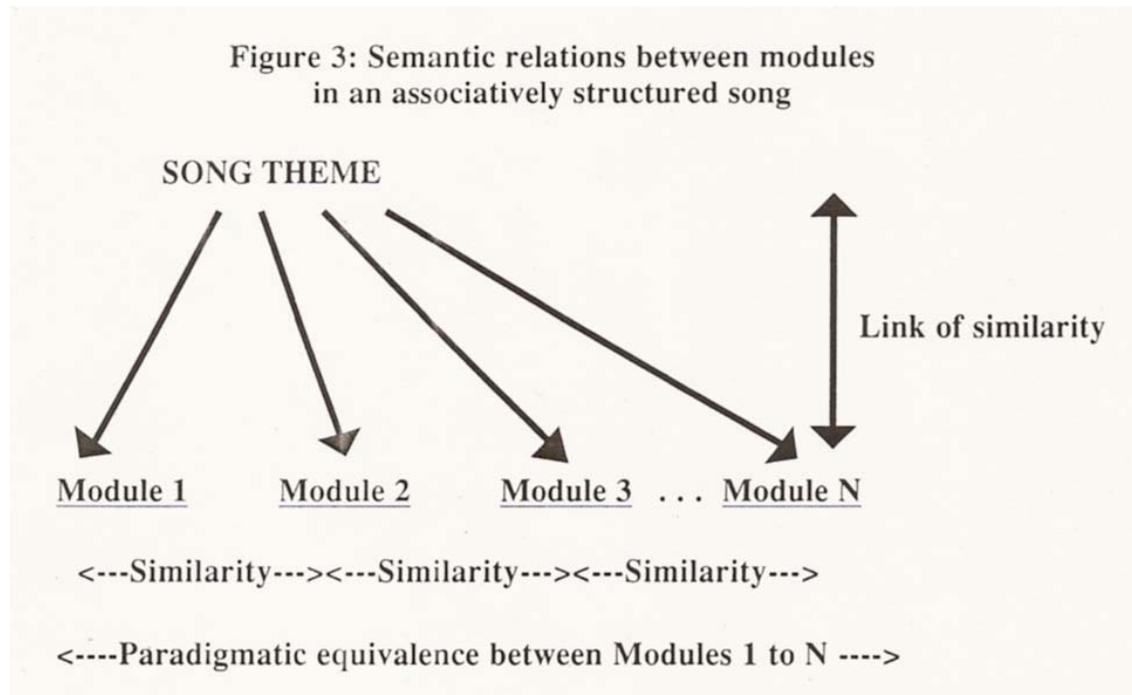
Curiously enough, the song ends abruptly with this rather negative couplet, just because it is so closely linked to the preceding one by the lexical and semantic repetition of the root-form *vain-*, *vaino*, which expresses the notion of blaming, disparaging, or finding fault. This somewhat inelegantly abrupt ending *en queue de poisson* is compensated by the strength of the preceding image, the apple tree in brilliant bloom, which is an extremely rich symbol in the *dainas*, loaded with positive connotations and associations (see Rūķe-Draviņa 1989).

The Associative Link in Longer Song Composition

Having seen in some detail how one associatively organized song is structured, we now return to considerations of what such songs might be like as a class. While several earlier authors have mentioned association as a principle of stanza organization (Ligere 1977, Ozols 1968), no ready-made sets of criteria for identifying this type of song are currently available. I propose that longer Latvian songs be classed as associative in type only if they answer to both of the following criteria. First of all, the sequence of stanzas or other text units should show the *absence of sequential narrative development*. This first criterion, then, is entirely negative, operating as it does by exclusion. The reason for this is purely pragmatic. Since association represents the weakest degree of sequential structuring, it would be difficult to uncover its principles of operation in texts where it is overshadowed by structurally stronger narrative principles. The second criterion requires the *presence of associative elements*, and these, in turn, are of two different types.

First, the modules in an associative song should belong to the same overall thematic category, each representing a new variation on this central theme. Such themes are part and parcel of the traditional thematic repertoire of the *dainas* and what they have to say about a variety of topics in that tradition (such as, in our text, the gossip about unmarried girls). The repertoire of modular core metaphors that develop variations on each given theme is also part of the tradition (e.g. sink or swim, drown or sit on a hilltop, and so on). These metaphors are associated with each other, as well as with their common theme, by a semantic link of similarity. At some level of their deep-semantic content, the modules would thus become paradigmatic equivalents of each other, being to some extent mutually interchangeable, as shown in Figure 3 below. Songs possessing only this modular type of thematic association would exhibit the lowest possible form

of sequential structuring, being at the next level above a total absence of any principle, i.e., total randomness.



In the song I analyzed above, each text module provided a variation on the central theme, which was an implicit contrast between positive and negative psychological states. Within each module, the deeper core metaphor or general semantic message was decoded into a series of less abstract but equally traditional poetic images and these, in turn, were expressed in the specific final wording (i.e. the given version of a recorded text). Most of the modules concretized the central theme through negative images of sinking or drowning and their many positive contraries: floating, swimming, crossing over water, or even wading across a river with a good, solid bottom. The implicit dynamic verticality of this contrast was specifically developed in a related set of metaphors, such as the swan rising out of the water, the maiden crown raised in the air, and the goddess Laima sitting on a hilltop. The overarching message of the song was that the “lyrical I” must not let herself be crushed by the low expectations, dire predictions, or bad wishes of others, for her essential personal integrity cannot be harmed by what other people say. Furthermore, the dim marriage prospects ascribed to her in the imagination of local village gossips will be blatantly contradicted by the gratifying reality of a brilliant match, arranged by none other than the goddess Laima herself.

A principle of thematic association such as the one just outlined, however, is only capable of explaining the “vertical” links of similarity in Figure 2, that is, the semantic link of similarity of each modular unit to a common, overarching theme. It would not possess any specific *principle of sequential organization*. Being semantically equivalent, the modules might be produced in any order whatsoever—that is, in every possible sequential permutation. In that case the sequence of stanzas produced by any one singer in any given recorded performance would not really represent a canonically “correct” song as a recognizable and stable entity. Any song such as we know it—either through oral or recorded transmission—might have been sung in any number of different orders from the one that happens to have been preserved for posterity. Upon examination, however, even the most loosely structured “strings of stanzas” in the *dainas* seem to exhibit at least some minimal degree of sequential organization, so that some units are more likely to follow each other in sequence than others. In a statistical sense, this amounts to introducing some degree of sequential dependency in the theoretically possible arrays of module (and stanza) sequences, so that some become more probable in any given position and others less so. In other words, sequentiality in associative songs such as “The Stone in the River” is neither blindly random nor rigidly deterministic, but probabilistic.

The major principle of sequential organization in the *dainas* is the presence of *syntagmatic associative links* between key items in successive modules. At the semantic level, these would be families of similar poetic images or metaphors, as well as a multilayered network of links of similarity and contrast. At the lexical level, these associative links would be of the kind typically found between pairs of words in free association tasks, such as antonyms (hard-soft), categorical equivalents (blue-green), or items linked by contiguity in everyday experience (salt-pepper) (see Warren 1921, Vīkis-Freibergs 1994a). At the phonetic level, association would be expected primarily on the principle of similarity, including recourse to homonyms and punning. The greater the number of associative links between two modules, the greater the probability that one would follow the other in a song. This would result in a relatively weakly structured overall song schema, as well as in sequential links of varying degrees of strength between different successive pairs of modules.

The syntagmatic associative links at each component layer of such a complex network might well operate through *spreading activation in associative networks*, following the same principles that are invoked in cognitive models of lexical retrieval (see, e.g., Dell 1986, McClelland et al. 1989). We may imagine any key word, concept, or even phonetic element of a module in performance as activating all modules in which the same or

similar elements are contained. Any module containing activated elements would then start moving “to the head of the line” in the mnemonic repertoire, ahead of such modules containing no associated elements. The more activated units in a module, the more likely that it might be chosen next in an actual performance. The sequential probability of any module Y (that is, the probability of Module Y following Module X) could then be expressed as the aggregate of the weighted strength of associative links of every type (phonetic, lexical, semantic) existing between them:

$$pY(X) = A_{\text{phon}} + A_{\text{lex}} + A_{\text{sem}} \dots\dots + A_x$$

The stronger the contextual activation of any given module, the more likely its choice as the next one to be produced among all possible candidates. Once activated, any associative element might remain active for some time, a condition that would account for remote or delayed associations within the song text, such as an image from Module 1 reappearing again in Module 4. The net result of such a process would be to restrict, at least to some extent, the degrees of freedom open to the singer in the choice of each successive song stanza, thus moving the structure of the overall song away from randomness and closer to a deliberate sequential schema of composition.

The theoretical model just outlined cannot claim to represent a precise process model of the detailed sequence of psychological events that would result in a song being either created for the first time or recreated from the tradition. As we know from experimental work on the processes of lexical access, for example, different process models could equally well account for the same sorts of empirical results (see Viķis-Freibergs 1994a). In a similar manner, different process models could be invoked to account for the same types of song structures.

Imagine for a moment by what specific mechanisms an associative song representing modular variations on a central theme could be produced in actual performance. In Model A, a singer’s whole repertoire of modules would be stored as one undifferentiated mass in a large, unlabelled mnemonic bag. Each module, however, would bear one or several tags identifying its thematic content. In performance, elements would be generated at random from the total repertoire, but before any text unit crossed the singer’s lips, it would be checked for thematic appropriateness and either accepted or rejected on that basis. In other words, in this model, the singer’s mental process is akin to, say, accepting only marbles of a certain pre-determined color (green, for instance) as they come out randomly from a mixed bag of every possible color, and rejecting all others

for the moment. In terms of psychological reaction times for the processes of selection, decision, and so on, this model seems somewhat cumbersome. Yet it just might be physically possible in the case of experienced singers. In Model B, modules would be stored from the start in separate, thematically labeled mnemonic loci or smaller “bags,” such as “all songs about oak trees,” “all songs about an orphan’s sorrows,” and so on. In the performance of such thematically associative songs, the singer’s first decision would be to select a given thematic subrepertoire. This done, the further process of selecting any one specific unit within the thematic bag could either be assumed to be random, or else to follow some additional principle of sequential organization.

Recapitulation and Conclusions

Songs of a loosely associative type seem to be put together more for the pleasure or satisfaction of the singer than with the conscious intent of impressing or entertaining a potential audience. While each module exhibits the high degree of internal cognitive structuring characteristic of the *daina* quatrain or sextet, the associative structure of the song as a whole may be relatively loose. In the case of work songs, especially those sung during physically demanding and highly coordinated tasks such as threshing, the main functions of the song are to keep rhythm and to promote endurance without being mentally distracting. In the case of lyrical songs that express some highly emotional preoccupation, such as “The Stone in the River,” each module contributes some new nuance in a protracted meditation on a problem and reiterates what amounts to a therapeutic solution to a fundamental emotional conflict. The negative images of social persecution and emotional pain allow the singer to become acutely conscious of a certain problem, even to the point of wallowing in self-pity. Yet again and again the negative image is supplanted by a positive one, thus canceling out its effects.

Such an exercise should not be dismissed too quickly as simple wool-gathering and wishful thinking. Curiously enough, the vivid visualization of solutions to one’s problems and the mental rehearsal of positive and self-valorizing feelings has been rediscovered in recent years by modern clinical psychology as an important tool in therapeutic intervention. In fact, half a century ago Robert Desoille, with his “ascension psychology,” was already employing guided imagination to develop “the verticality of aerial imagination” in his patients, thus leading to the sublimation of their problems (Bachelard 1943). In still earlier

times, the singing of loosely associative songs such as “The Stone in the River” might well have served a similar therapeutic purpose for the *daina* singers—“The Stone in the River” even includes the ascension element so emphasized by Desoille. This might well account, at least in part, for the apparent lack of interest in creating more developed global compositional schemas. All that was needful and useful in a structural sense being already available within the scope of the quatrain or the sextet, higher level composition would tend to be neglected in favor of global emotional coherence and force. By playing a new variation on the common theme, each module induces a cathartic visualization of both the felt problem and of its desired solution. Long before psychotherapy was invented, the singer of old could look to her oral tradition, where she would find a plentiful supply of poetic icons to reinforce her sense of personal integrity, reassure her about the strength of her inner resources, and assure her of divine love and protection.¹⁷

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