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Carving the Names of “Not-Persons”: Ex-centric Perspectives on Community in Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers*

Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of community in Jane Urquhart’s latest novel, The Stone Carvers (2001), which juxtaposes two temporal planes: one depicts the construction of the small community of Shoneval in Ontario in the nineteenth century, while the second one shows the crisis of community from the perspective of ex-centric protagonists before, during and after the First World War. The term community is used to refer to various forms of group-identity: family, local society, nation. The analysis focuses mostly on Urquhart’s interrogation of the Canadian myth of World War I: the author’s deconstruction of the artificial national unity at the beginning of the conflict, the questioning of the official memory of glory and noble sacrifice (connected with the Battle of Vimy Ridge in particular) and her ambiguous attitude to the construction of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial. The paper concludes with broader reflections on the concept of community in Jane Urquhart’s writings, and its significance in the Canadian context as well as in the Central European region.

Résumé

Cet article est une étude du concept de la communauté dans le dernier roman de Jane Urquhart, The Stone Carvers (2001), qui juxtapose deux espaces temporels : la construction de la communauté de Shoneval au XIX^{ème} siècle et la crise de la communauté au cours de trois premières décennies du XX^{ème} siècle. Le terme communauté renvoie aux différentes formes d’appartenance identitaire : la famille, la société locale, la nation. L’analyse se concentre surtout sur la déconstruction du mythe canadien de la Première Guerre Mondiale présentée par Urquhart dans son roman : son interrogation de l’unité nationale et de la mémoire officielle de la bataille de la crête de Vimy ainsi que son attitude ambivalente envers la construction du monument commémoratif du Canada à Vimy. L’article finit avec quelques réflexions critiques sur le concept de la communauté dans l’oeuvre de Urquhart et son importance dans un contexte plus large, celui du Canada et de l’Europe Centrale.

In *The Stone Carvers* (2001), her latest novel, Jane Urquhart juxtaposes two temporal planes: the first one depicts the construction of the small community of Shoneval in Ontario in the nineteenth century, while the second one shows the disintegration of this community from the perspective of ex-centric protagonists before, during and after the First World War. The

term *ex-centric* refers to Linda Hutcheon's definition of difference (understood as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, personal memory etc.) through which "various manifestations of centralizing and centralized authority are challenged" (Hutcheon, 195). The voices of these characters, whom Urquhart calls "not-persons", question the harmony and unity that every community needs to survive. The term *community* is used in the analysis that follows in the sense of any form of belonging, group-identity: family, local society, nation. All these forms of collectivity constitute what Michel Foucault refers to as *social bodies*: "the phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals" (Foucault, 55). The unity and coherence of any group-identity is therefore manufactured through the mechanisms of power, marginalisation and exclusion.

In *The Stone Carvers*, Father Archangel Gstir's efforts to build a closely bound community in Shoneval in the 1860s illustrates symbolically the construction of Canadian nation. Arriving from Bavaria to the Township of Carrick in 1867 he is shocked by the surrounding chaos and the lack of communication between the scattered settlements. Yet he is convinced that religion can unite the isolated German immigrants. He is not discouraged by the fact that the inhabitants of the valley do not show much interest in spirituality, roughing it in the bush. He demands that a Corpus Christi procession be held, convinced that the display of pageantry will "flush them out of the forest" (19). To those immigrant-settlers who live in utter isolation "a project completed for reasons other than survival would seem an act of pure madness" (104), the absurdity and novelty of which they could not, however, resist. Carrying the crucifix, the sculpture of Virgin Mary and Child and the miniature church, all executed by Joseph Becker, the would-be parishioners move forward among pasture animals decorated with wildflowers. Father Gstir's idea of community is based on the European model of medieval settlements centred around the church. Spirituality brings the immigrants together, the social function of religion is, however, also emphasised in the novel. After a day of hard agricultural labour, the villagers willingly devote their time and effort to building a log church. Notwithstanding the obstacles and hardships, within some fifteen years the log construction is transformed into a stone church. Four years later, a bell sent by King Ludwig of Bavaria completes the priest's marvellous dream in the wilderness. Faith and the common effort unite the individual workers into one body of community.

It is significant that, among the priorities enumerated by Father Gstir as essential for the future parish, the Corpus Christi procession, the construction of the church and the bell are listed together with a brewery. Beer drinking, a German characteristic in the Old World, is to fulfil its social function in the New one as well. As Father Gstir allows the carvers to carry the miniature model of the brewery in the procession, other Old World architectural designs are also hastily added, "renditions of structures they either remembered fondly from their pasts or fervently hoped would appear in their futures" (105): models of Bavarian farms and castles, a convent, an opera house, a tavern, etc. These architectural works, each characterised by a

specific social function, illustrate the immigrants' desire to transfer the structures of the Old World into the New one in a joint effort of (re)constructing collectivity. The communal aspect of their dream is symbolised by the colourful body of the procession, bringing the inhabitants of the valley together for the first time. Father Gstir, though possessed of the desire to fill their hearts with genuine faith, is well aware that initially it is not religion but solitude and boredom that draw the destitute settlers to what they see as an absurd parade.

Although most of them are grateful to God for having saved them from the fate of soldiers involved in absurd but deadly European wars, the settlers of Shoneval still carry fond memories of Europe in their hearts. Joseph Becker, for example, the German woodcarver who completes most of the altarpieces for the Shoneval church, does not feel as much at home in his Canadian farmhouse as in his barn workshop – “for it was in his workshop that he preserved Europe” (90). The miniature medieval cities and churches that still surround the protagonist in his old age move him to tears because of the memories that they bring to his mind. For the immigrants of Shoneval, Europe represents their romanticised past, a strong attachment to culture and a resentment towards absurd violence, all of which they attempt to transmit to their Canadian-born offspring as time passes and the community flourishes.

Nonetheless, the strong communal ties depicted in the passages of the novel that focus on Father Gstir and his parishioners seem to have become much looser in the twentieth century. Juxtaposing the two temporal planes, Urquhart contrasts the tangible growth of the Shoneval congregation in the nineteenth century with the crisis of the community in the first three decades of the twentieth century, which is represented on several levels. Thus, chronologically, the disintegration of the Becker family shows some features of the more general chaos and disruption. Joseph Becker's grandson Tilman keeps running away from home and wandering through the Canadian countryside and cities, coming back occasionally without any explanation. His mother, terrified that one day he will stay away permanently, forces her husband to chain Tilman into a harness. The child howls like a beast, his skin and ribs bruised, foam covering his mouth. When his sister frees him, he decided never to come back home again. His future attempts to enter any community will be always cautious and uncertain, be it the Italian settlement, the army or the veterans' group at the prostheses factory. As for the Beckers, the unity is forever broken. Tilman's mother sinks into a mental depression, resenting her husband's and her daughter Klara's presence. She dies prematurely and Klara, wounded and dejected, having experienced so early emotional rejection and loss, believes that she must stay on the farm, forever tied to place, in order to take care of her father and grandfather. Consequently, family becomes the symbol of confinement and restriction. It generates unhappiness and limits individual freedom and fulfilment.

The crisis of community on a larger scale is suggested in *The Stone Carvers* by the fate of Nicolò Vogomanti's Italian relatives, representing the discrimination and exploitation of immigrants in the urban Canada of the

beginning of the twentieth-century. Nicolo forces his brother to take a job at a steel mill. The brother is killed in an accident but the factory does not notify the family as, instead of his name, they put the word "foreigner" on the payroll. Since nobody claims his body, they bury him in the potter's field. The fate of the Italian immigrant highlights the exclusion of this minority group from the official construction of nation. *The Stone Carvers* illustrates this erasure, non-existence of ethnic minorities when Nicolo complains: "He didn't even have a name. At the stoveworks I didn't have a name either. I was, he was, a *not-person*" (211, my emphasis). As in the case of Tilman and family, it is the community that deprives the individual of his humanity. This tragedy involves another one as Nicolo, unable to carry the burden of grief and remorse, abandons his family to become a vagrant. Like Tilman, he subsists on the margins of society; excluded from the status-quo; they both inhabit a liminal space from which they question the coherence of the boundaries that the collectivity needs in order to function as a harmonious whole.

Although *The Stone Carvers* points to signs of disunity and exclusion in Canada already in the first decade of the twentieth-century, the unity of the nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 6) comes into the most serious questioning in Urquhart's representation of the First World War. Adopting the ex-centric perspectives of her protagonists, the author deconstructs the Canadian "national myth" (Francis, 11) of the Great War. Firstly, she depicts the artificial construction of national unity in Canada at the beginning of World War I. Secondly, she interrogates the master narrative of the Great War as a war of glory and noble sacrifice, undermining above all the official memory of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Finally, *The Stone Carvers* also views the post-war years in Canada with bitter irony and criticism.

Portraying the general enthusiasm accompanying the enlisted soldiers leaving for the front all over Ontario, Urquhart notices that these young boys felt themselves to be part of "a force so sweeping and elemental they were on the verge of forgetting their individual names. The word 'we' sprang so easily and so joyfully to their lips that the word 'them' would not be long to follow" (153). Thus, the author points out the binary construction of nation, defining itself as homogenous against another group, in this case the German enemy. The imperial implications are not insignificant either. As Pierre Berton emphasises in his myth-shattering history of the Canadian wars *Marching as to War*, official propaganda presented World War I as a conflict between Germany and the Empire. "The appeals for imperial solidarity that characterized these frenzied days spoke entirely of the whole and less of the parts" (Berton, 132).

Yet, in Urquhart's village of Shoneval, Eamon O'Sullivan, Klara's silent lover of Irish background, is the only one to enlist. As the narrator of *The Stone Carvers* observes, this reluctance should not be attributed to the German background of the village, but the main reason of these people's immigration to Canada, namely "freedom from armed conflict" (136). Pierre Berton points out that two-thirds of the young Canadians who volunteered in August 1914 had been born in Britain; the Canadian-born made up only one

quarter of the first contingent. Most of them were victims of the two-year depression preceding the war and saw in the voyage to Europe an opportunity to improve their disastrous economic situation (Berton, 132-3). In *The Stone Carvers* it is precisely the reaction of Tilman and his friend Giorgio, out of work, when the war breaks out, because of massive layoffs. The aura of patriotic fervour constructed by the official propaganda is thus undermined in Urquhart's novel. When Eamon enlists, he is not worshipped as the other Ontario volunteers. His Irish family disowns him; because of the experience of colonialism, his father cannot accept that his son will fight for England. Rejected by Klara, condemned by his family, Eamon is in fact ostracised by the whole community and refused any form of group-identity. He becomes well aware of his position as an outsider because of his Irish Catholic background. Eamon's Irishness renders him suspicious and, paradoxically, although he volunteers to defend Canada, it pushes him, like the other ex-centric characters of *The Stone Carvers*, into a liminal space, beyond the national core. Questioning the nationalist myth of patriotic unity, Urquhart creates a lonely protagonist whose decision to leave for the Great War, motivated by his childish desire to fly an aeroplane, is viewed by the majority as eccentric, romantic and naive.

Moreover, in a very subtle way, the author interrogates the official memory of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. It is at Vimy that Eamon is reported missing and that Tilman loses his leg. The battle is depicted in the novel mostly through Tilman's memories that constitute the perspective of an ordinary soldier. Historical sources reveal that after a four-day battle, on April 9, 1917 the Canadian Corps managed to capture the ridge at Vimy, a previously impregnable German position. Although Vimy was in fact a minor victory, only a part of the inconclusive battle of Arras that could not by itself achieve the breakthrough the allies were hoping for, according to the national myth Canada "came of age at Vimy":

We carry it with us, for it has been drilled into our minds by constant repetition, a tale retold, like a looped movie – the heart-thumping spectacle of the entire Canadian Corps clambering up that whale-backed ridge, enduring the dreadful din, and hugging dangerously close to the creeping curtain of high explosives that stupefied the burrowed defenders. (Berton, 178)

In *The Stone Carvers*, Tilman's memories reveal only the bloody aspects of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. In the official memory, Vimy Ridge conjures a mosaic of associations: "glory, heroism, panache, comradeship" (Berton, 371), all of which are undermined by Tilman's trench-eye impressions. He depicts the battle as "the craziest thing", "pure bedlam" (230), "hell" (242), "carnage" (249) and "horror" (321). When it was over, he could not believe that it was a victory: "hardly anyone who had participated and survived would remember anything about it, except the chaos" (230). Tilman confides to Klara that because of his German background he could understand the German soldiers speaking in their trenches a few metres away and was shocked by the familiar, ordinary topics of their talks. He often forgot that

they were the enemy, the Hun that he was supposed to loathe and destroy without mercy. When Klara forces her brother to go back to France, he is haunted by the memories of the slaughter and the claustrophobia of the trenches, tormented by the sight of the omnipresent graves.

The absurd, bloody aspects of the war, characteristic of the anti-war novel, are also highlighted by Giorgio, whose battles were fought more to the North, at Ypres and Passchendaele. Giorgio observes ironically that he was promoted to the rank of corporal because of the fact that he stayed alive, while everybody else in his battalion was missing or dead. He denies having performed any act of heroism. Both Tilman's and Giorgio's vision of the bloodshed contradicts the public memory of World War I. As Daniel Francis puts it, the master narrative presents the Great War "as heroic struggles to preserve a way of life from enemies who would overwhelm it. (...) The belief that Canada 'came of age' at Vimy Ridge (...) sanctions the slaughter, makes it purposeful, repays in part the debt we owe to the men who died there" (Francis, 126). This idealised official memory of the war, promoting national unity and patriotism, is undermined by the ex-centric voices of *The Stone Carvers*.

Urquhart's questioning of the myth of war reaches even deeper in the passages that depict the fate of war-veterans upon their return to Canada. Those who were promised immortality and glory can hardly be reintegrated into the community. After the war, Canada was facing an economic crisis. "The presence of the demobilized soldiers, often at loose ends, added to the widespread social unrest that touched many parts of the country in the months immediately after the Armistice" (Brown, 418). Urquhart focuses on the particularly tragic situation of the handicapped veterans, many of whom, like Tilman, were missing limbs. Frequently rejected by their families, who were horrified by their physical disability, most of those men "were too broken in spirit anyway to re-engage in anything that predated 1914, could hardly remember who they had been before the catastrophe" (234). Several of them were employed in a government factory making wooden prostheses for themselves and other handicapped soldiers. In Tilman's memories, the work at the factory appears a nightmare, more appalling than the life in the trenches. He depicts the grim atmosphere of the work they hated, the bad food and the poor standards of living, the screams of the traumatised veterans at night, all these elements constantly reminding the former soldiers of their handicap and the tragedy of the war, instead of helping them to forget. After two years, the demand for the prostheses diminished and the factory was closed down by the authorities. With irony, Urquhart points out the carelessness of the nation which tries to expel the former soldiers out of its bounds: "Satisfied that they had done all that they could to rehabilitate Tilman and his colleagues, the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets" (235). Consequently, most of those who were promised eternal youth and romance became tramps and beggars, still traumatised by the war and bitterly disappointed with the community they had fought so hard to defend. Similarly to Tilman and his comrades, Giorgio, who managed to find employment immediately after the war, some years later becomes a migrant

worker, and eventually a vagrant “out of work, out of money, out of luck” (278).

Urquhart renders in very dramatic terms the tragedy of the war-veterans whose existence the society would like to erase, to forget. When Klara, tormented by her recollections of Eamon brought back by her brother’s terrible stories about the war, refuses to listen any longer, Tilman’s reaction conveys the personal tragedy of the individuals whose experience is ignored and muted:

“You have no idea how awful it was. Nobody has any idea.”

“Don’t tell me,” Klara said. “Please, just don’t talk about it.”

“No,” said Tilman, “you wouldn’t want to know. No one does.” He turned his back and hobbled over to the door. “No one here wants to know anything about it.” (243)

The Stone Carvers thus depicts the conflict between the civilians who sent their relatives and beloved to be sacrificed in the Great War and the eyewitnesses of the slaughter. As Bertrand suggests, it was in the former’s name that “the lies were told, the propaganda machine oiled up, the demonization of the enemy was carried to insane lengths, and the brutal facts about ‘the war that will end all wars’ (...) were unrevealed in all their naked horror” (Bertrand, 127). Those who lost the loved ones did not want to know the appalling truth about their mangled bodies, did not want to learn that their death was futile and absurd as the Great War did not really solve the conflict. They wanted to believe in the immortality of the Fallen and the purity of the cause for which they sacrificed their lives. Thus, the grim fate of those who survived the war and are rejected by the community contrasts ironically in *The Stone Carvers* with the survival of the Fallen in memory and in the war memorials that soon covered the whole country. Giorgio spends the years following the war completing marble plaques, portrait busts, individual memorials and, eventually, village cenotaphs.¹ The pale faces of the young men he carves all appear peaceful and unaffected by war, as the stone carries no mark of the violence done to their bodies. These false representations contrast vividly with the maimed bodies of the veterans, the not-persons whose reality the bereaved prefer to ignore. Thus, Urquhart exposes the system of ideological power hidden behind aesthetic representations: some are allowed, while others are blocked and muted. As a result, the nation emerges as necessarily divided, unable to contain its heterogeneous narratives and counter-narratives. In Homi K. Bhabha’s words,

strategies of representation and empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual or even incommensurable. (Bhabha, 3)

The Canadian National Vimy Memorial, “a kind of supercenotaph” (Bertrand, 179), constitutes the most monumental shrine to the 66,655

Canadians who died in the First World War. The towering pylons and sculptured figures were carved from a particularly light limestone brought from an abandoned Roman quarry on the Adriatic Sea. The names of 11,285 Canadians who were killed in France during the First World War and whose resting place is unknown are carved on the walls of the monument. After the war, because of the enormous loss of Canadian lives, the French gave the battleground to Canada in perpetuity. It should be emphasised that the work on the project, which took eleven years to be completed, did not stop during the Depression. *The Stone Carvers* renders in bitter terms the contrast between the miserable conditions of war-veterans in Canada and the enormous sums of money sent by the authorities to architect Walter Seymour Allward in France. When hearing about the project from a vagrant, a former soldier who lost his arm in the war, Giorgio can hardly believe it:

“The government is really going to pay for all this?” Giorgio asked.

“So I’ve heard,” said the pencil seller and then added under his breath, “the bastards.” (279)

Nevertheless, the novel does not only portray the Vimy Memorial as the ultimate expression of the master narrative of community. Only briefly does Urquhart depict the crowds of pilgrims, veterans and their families, who visited “the now altered, manicured battlefield” (379) upon the opening of the Vimy Memorial in 1936. She mentions the fanfare and the patriotic fervour, “the oceans of grief” (379) revisited by women, the stories told about the Fallen ones, who, almost two decades after the war, could hardly be remembered. The narrative of “the Vimy fever” (Bertrand, 306) that reaffirms the bounds of the nation is of slight interest to the author of *The Stone Carvers*. What her novel highlights instead is the healing function of art and love that help her ex-centric protagonists re-establish their ties with the community.

The work on the Vimy Memorial is particularly significant for Klara, who, in many ways, appears the most excluded character of all. Rejected by her parents in childhood, she experiences tragic love with Eamon’s departure and death in the war. Faithful to the memory of her beloved, she remains single, deprived of family, the basic community. Her unhappiness makes her lose faith and the desire for carving. She devotes her life to sewing, hidden behind the walls of her house, sharing nothing with the other villagers of Shoneval. “With Eamon lost, she felt connected to no one” (168). The heroine becomes overwhelmed by the tragedy of war, which, gradually, makes her lose touch with reality and drift inside, into a world of grief and remorse: “Klara could not get over a feeling of distance, a sense that she was not only separated from the community in which she lived but also that she was becoming oddly disassociated from the trappings of the only home she had ever known” (226). Furthermore, Klara feels an ex-centric also because of the fact that she is a woman and, as such, she is tied to place, to the farm on which she is awaiting the departed beloved. Paralysed, she is not able to leave this place of memory alone, while others, men, move away. The heroine envies men their freedom and resents the sense of closure connected with the house, the

realm of the feminine. Therefore, when Tilman eventually agrees to take her to France, she sees the voyage not only as an act of liberation – from her former self, but also as an act of emancipation. Discarding her feminine clothes, Klara disguises as a man, Karl, and penetrates into the male world; at Vimy, she shares the carvers' intimate existence both working with them during the day and resting with them in the common dormitories at night. In this way, she acquires the freedom necessary to realise her dreams, yet she remains mute, as Karl can only whisper so as not to reveal his gender.

At the end of the novel, Urquhart shows how all her ex-centric characters symbolically re-enter the community at the site of the Vimy Memorial. By sculpting Eamon's face on the figure of the torchbearer and by carving his name on the very monument, Klara performs a ceremony in his remembrance and makes Eamon regain his place among the Fallen in the official memory of the nation. What is more, in this way, she reconciles herself with the past and opens up to the future. Eventually, by offering her love to Giorgio, Klara recovers her voice and her femininity. Pouring the pain of premature bereavement and lost youth into the stone, "the two damaged people" (379) manage to re-inscribe their own names into the narrative of community. Urquhart portrays the two lovers working together on the monument emphasising the tenderness, twinship and collaboration between them (371). And Allward, the artist, is fascinated by the perfect balance that he feels in Klara and Giorgio's presence, the balance between the personal and the universal, the individual and the community. As to Tilman, his homoerotic relationship with Monsieur Recouvreur opens him for the first time in his life to another human being. Love, although quite different from the one sanctified by the norm, makes him re-enter the status quo; together with his lover, he starts a prospering business as a restaurateur in the heart of Montreal. Consequently, although they do not entirely abandon their ex-centric characteristics, the protagonists of *The Stone Carvers* lose their status as not-persons, meandering between the liminal and the centre, erasing the artificial boundaries between these two spaces.

A critical attitude towards the national master narratives seems a characteristic feature of Jane Urquhart's fiction. In her earlier novels, the author frequently interrogates dominant artistic representations (*The Whirlpool*, *Changing Heaven*) or undermines the official discourse of history (*Away*, *The Underpainter*). However, it is in *The Stone Carvers* that she seems to explore in the most powerful way the questioning potential of difference in order to articulate the need to rethink the relation between belonging, heterogeneity and group identity. *The Stone Carvers* depicts the crisis of the community on several levels: from family to local collectivity, to nation. The experience of Urquhart's ex-centric protagonists, placed on the margin of the social, challenges the unity of these groups. The novel shows how Canada fails to "imagine" these characters as an integral part of the nation, rendering them mute and thus relegating them to the role of non-existing persons. Yet, although silenced and ignored, the not-persons disturb the imagined boundaries of communities, undermining their coherence with persistent counter-narratives of their own. Consequently, community appears as split within itself, unable to assimilate the heterogeneity of its voices.

Moreover, *The Stone Carvers* demonstrates that forms of political group-identity, such as nations, are artefacts, cultural constructs based on manufactured ideas of unity and harmony. However, Urquhart does not reject the notion of community altogether, but points to the necessary exchange between the centre and the liminal, which can alter and enrich traditional conceptions of belonging. "It is in the emergence of these interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha, 2; emphasis in the original). Urquhart seems to suggest alternative ways of thinking about group-identity, based on creative differences and tolerance towards otherness. As in her earlier novels, *The Underpainter* in particular, the author emphasises the significance of intimate relationships, bonds of love that create communities of the heart essential for the individual to survive in the chaos of the modern world. In *The Stone Carvers* it appears that only when personal fulfilment is achieved the forms of group-identity can be negotiated. Urquhart's scepticism towards the idea of community appears fascinating in its Canadian context because of her critical dialogue with the Canadian past. However, it is also particularly enriching in the Central European region, where we need to be wary of violent forms of nationalism and of the traditional master narratives and where we have yet to learn to respect the otherness of not-persons.

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Endnote

1. More than thirteen hundred war memorials can be found in Canada, situated in the most central place in the community: "granite obelisks and marble monoliths, statues and stelae, pillars and shafts, cairns, arches, crosses, slabs, and pyramids, all dedicated to the memory of the Fallen". Berton points out that very few of these depict soldiers who are clearly dead (Berton, 126).

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