

# The Linguistical Transformation Of Matei Vişniec's Theatre Between Romanian And French Language, Between Censorship And Liberality

**Edoardo GIORGI**  
*University of Pisa, Italy*  
[e.giorgi13@studenti.unipi.it](mailto:e.giorgi13@studenti.unipi.it)

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**Abstract:** In this article, which is a derivative work of a chapter of my master's degree thesis, I'll focus on the peculiarity of Matei Vişniec's poetic: the bilingualism, an action that impose itself because of the exile's phenomenon that saw many of the finest writers in the communist Romania flee the country due to the oppressive regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu. In that regard, we'll see how the French "contamination" has influenced not only the theatre's language, but also its core, its soul, its interests. I hope therefore to prove that the bilingualism doesn't operate only on a physical (and mental) writing ground, but also on an "intentional" semiotic level; we could possibly say that it works on the entire "communication level".

**Keywords:** *exile, theatre, translation, bilingualism, French, Romanian.*

## Introduction

The bilingualism in Matei Vişniec's plays, which is to be examined in this paper, certainly constitutes a peculiarity within his poetics that reflects the historical-political context that led him to make certain choices. Even in Italian literature exists some cases of bilingualism, to mention the most interesting and famous ones – in my opinion – just think about Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Gabriele D'Annunzio. While the former used the French language for reasons of personal preference, mostly formative, having studied in a Jesuit-run school in Egypt and having obtained the baccalaureate in Paris, the latter would seem to reflect more the foundations of Vişniec's choice, having D'Annunzio also been in self-exile in France (but because of creditors). In that period, in fact, start the publishing of his French texts.

However, it should be noted that in the two Italian poets the knowledge of the French language was already consolidated and therefore it is likely that they thought and wrote directly in it, while we know that Vişniec, at the time of the exile, did not know the language of adoption and transcribed some of his works first with the help of some translators and then independently. Thanks to this comparison with the two Italian poets, we can perhaps understand even more the peculiarity of the bilingualism in the French-Romanian playwright, acquired from scratches, but, to a certain degree, also in other Romanian

authors of the twentieth century such as Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, Benjamin Fondane, up to Gherasim Luca.

### **The transmission of the message under censorship**

Matei Vişniec left Romania in 1987 and from that moment on, in his textual production, he was confronted with the theme analyzed here: the problem of translation and self-translation.

But before the implementation of his bilingualism, it must be said that the author had already been formed in a certain approach that was mainly affected by the political situation of that period. His beginnings are those of a poet: 'Under the communist regime, literature was the only way that allowed to acquire a certain freedom of thought. Everyone wrote poetry. Even young people and boys: all crazy about poetry. I think people instinctively sought a language independent of ideology'<sup>1</sup> (Vişniec 2009: 2). It is in those moments that he understood that communist censorship allowed poetry books and novels to pass relatively free; but that was not the theater's case, precisely because of its intrinsic social qualities. This is how – for talking about current events – the works by Pirandello, Shakespeare, Chekhov etc. were used; they were reworked in a semantic way: through their original plot and their allusive images it was possible to convey information on contemporary politics otherwise impossible to narrate.

But even here the message conveyed had to be, for the Government, absolutely and utterly controlled: a form of censorship – called by Vişniec himself "stupid" – could take place even at the gestural level:

The commission came and noted every gesture of each actor. It was not the words that counted, those were accepted because they were in the books, they were "classic". Gestures, on the other hand, were dangerous. For example, Richard III, saying 'Forward, to the battle', made a gesture that was censored because in that direction there were the headquarters of the Communist Party. Then the actor pointed in another direction, but not even that gesture could be made, because on that side there was the Ministry of the Interior or the President's palace. You couldn't move. (Vişniec 2009: 2)

Or, even, the director could've been forced to change entire scenes creating by consequence various versions for the same show. In fact, the authors wrote according to censorship so that they could overcome it<sup>2</sup> and convey a message; the same happened for Vişniec, at least until his transfer to France. (Croitoru 2020: 52)

There were at the time, according to Ion Simuţ, four types of transmission of the message, four types of literature: the opportunist (regime-bound), the evasive (where writers said neither yes nor no through aestheticism), the subversive one (applied by Vişniec, which simultaneously said yes and no through the strategy of derision to confuse the message in the eyes of censorship) and the properly dissident literature. It should be noted that censorship also affected the translations of foreign texts, if they brought any

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<sup>1</sup> All in-text citations, even the lengthy ones, have been translated by me.

<sup>2</sup> Even when this had been "officially" suppressed in 1977, but in fact creating the phenomenon of self-censorship.

criticism of the regime's ideology. (Croitoru 2020: 53) Literature and art had to carry only propagandist values, and that had to be the basic concept for translations as well. (Malița 2020: 24)

In Vişniec's translational direction, following self-exile, three phases can be identified: the first includes literature written in Romanian and in Romania, from 1976-77 until 1987, consisting of three volumes of poetry and several theatrical plays published only from the early Nineties, as well as the novel *Cafeneaua Pas-Parol*, written in 1982. The same trend must be associated with the lyrics and fictions written in France and published by the author in Romanian throughout the 2000's. The second direction (1987-1993) of searching for one's own literary identity, in a new linguistic and cultural environment – of which the dramaturgical text *Angajare de clown* is representative – must be indicated as a phase of translation and self-translation, as well as of progressive conquest of bilingualism. The third phase includes plays written by the author directly in French, which the translational analysis can no longer circumscribe appropriately in terms of self-translation, in the sense of translation of an original literary text towards a second target language. (David 2011: 48-49)

### **The message's transmission in the libertarian French society, the self-translation, and the bilingualism**

In France, another capital factor for the Vişniecian theater develops: the text free dissemination and reading, which leads to a pure configuration – without censorship – of the elements of the spectacular process; as the director of the Théâtre de l'est parisien, Guy Retore, said: 'Right from the act of reading, it is the urgency to present the play on the scene that imposes itself first of all' (Guccini 2009: 12). The rawness of Vişniec's words, and of what they bear, is linked to a certain degree of musicality, rhythm, and poetic sense, which exacerbate the horror of the extreme situations described in his plays. This requires rigorous staging, because words alone are not enough; it must be the actor who provides the essence of the play.

Pascal Papini, in fact, rightly points out that the author lived in his first thirty years in a totalitarian situation where censorship and other forms of oppression denied individual identity; but the same problem remains also in our liberal and interconnected world, and with equal force. In his theater there are no heroes: the fate of the characters and their struggles are not affirmed, as in the *topos* of classical tragedy, through duty or passion, but through cowardice, wanting to resist, living. It is therefore necessary that the language should involve the perception of reality of the reader/viewer, contextualizing the existences designated by the text in similar experiences of real life. It is Christian Auger who analyzes this rhetorical expedient, and he's also the one who contributed largely to the fortune of Vişniec in France with the staging of six premières between 1993 and 2002, also noting that the dramaturgy of the playwright simultaneously cultivates opposite impulses, with the consequent birth of oxymorons, both conceptual and all the more stylistic, which are balanced between reality and unreality, simplicity and complexity, generality

and detail; it speaks at the same time of the world and of the individual's behavior, of today but also of yesterday and tomorrow. The oxymoron is characteristic of the Vişniecian theater not only because it is frequent but also because, above all, explains his poetics.

Linguistically speaking, together with other eminent figures of the Romanian literature, the transplant in France has led the author to abandon his mother tongue to assume that of adoption (from 1992); this, as can be guessed, creates a modification of his theatrical writing:

Initially, I translated the plays I had written into Romanian [*Caii la fereastră* (1986); *Angajare de clown* (1987); *Ultimul Godot* (1987)]; it was a very interesting exercise, because it made me understand what could pass and what could not. [...] Then I started writing directly in French trying to acquire a clear style. (Vişniec 2009: 3)

The author initially began to translate some of his Romanian plays into French, with the help of some translators. This phase has greatly intrigued him, leading him to analyze what could pass and what could not through the translational process, which can make a text on the one hand richer in meaning but on the other can impoverish it of some nuances. (Vişniec 2009: 3) All translations were made with the gaze of a translator who did not know Romanian at all. The author created the initial proposal for each reply and later, people who did not know the language, came to read and make observations, proposing one word instead of another, and Vişniec chose, depending on the proposals, the most appropriate solution. In the theatrical field, therefore, he never had a "total" translator from Romanian into French but, at the beginning, some collaborators for the plays *Spectatorul condamnat la moarte*, *Angajare de clown e Bine, mamă, da' ăştia povestesc în actu' doi ce se-nţimplă-n actu'-ntîi*. *Caii la fereastră* was translated by him together with a translator with the aim of obtaining in French the same rhythm and the same impression of absurdity, already present in Romanian, and the same surprises. (David 2015: 592)

In the intermediate phase of 'incipient bilingualism'<sup>3</sup>, in which Vişniec translates but still does not write in the language of adoption, the propagation of his work also concerns both France and Romania (in 1989 the regime had fallen), where all the media talked about him. Finally important prizes and awards arrive from his Country. This double opening of diffusive channels explains that the choice to adopt the French language was not due to a real necessity, but to a purely personal and cultural decision, aimed at a better detection, in the democracies of the West, of contexts of contradictory and occult oppression in the eyes of most (not through censorship but through information), but also of subliminal languages; Vişniec wanted to be, as he had been for the communist context, a witness of the "social recondit". This impulse of inquiry is an ethical and, intrinsically, linguistic message constitutive of his theater – even if the author does not recognize it as such – because he has wedged himself into his life through journalistic activity. (Guccini 2009: 28) A

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<sup>3</sup> The terminology that I adopt here, defining the bilingualism of the author as "incipient" and "mature", derives from David (2020: 227).

case of Western oppression has also occurred, in the Balkans, at the level of social-translational dynamics, as the author tells us:

Today in the East we are obsessed with America, and no one looks at its neighbor anymore. During communism, Romanians, Hungarians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Poles had the obligation to translate each other: there was an order to fraternize. But now, for Romanians reading Bulgarian pieces or novels has become unbearable! Reading any novel of an American nullity is wonderful, fantastic, while reading the best novels of Poland, Serbia or Hungary seems like a form of manipulation of the past regime. (Vişniec 2009: 3)

It is interesting to note, in the wake of this observation, that Vişniec is not only interested in the translational process, but also considers the social dynamics that can surround it.

The author's mature phase of translation (or rather, mature bilingualism) presents conspicuous rewritings and modifications, especially lexical and rhetorical, between the French version and the self-translation into Romanian; it is a competence that Georges Mounin (*TT* 1965: 118-125) defines as ethnographic and that is very useful in correcting the translation failure of some cultural aspects of the source language. In Vişniec one can therefore find the ability to systematically coordinate two linguistic systems with the same profit. Self-translation – in which we try to privilege the poetic component, as Vişniec himself tells (David 2015: 588) – therefore becomes a conscious rewriting often dictated by the diversity of the cultural horizon of the reader, whether Romanian or French; the differences must be taken into account by identifying the work as bilingual. (David 2013: 261-267) In the words of Emilia David, in fact: 'bilingualism is in Vişniec a function of the work, since the writer consciously manifests the intention to build a different style in the new language, in the compositional sense and in other meanings, an alternative and complementary style which he adopts in his dramaturgical writing in his mother tongue' (David 2020: 226). In the third phase of writing, Vişniec acts as a mediator between the French and Romanian languages and cultures, to independently convey the specific anthropological visions of the world and perhaps consequently changing a part of the text to not incur in an opacification of meaning for the readers-public of one or the other culture. (David 2013: 262-266)

The French language, in addition to being an object of his professional exploration, is also a tool to investigate a different civil life and different anthropological and social aspects. Since there are no dictatorships and since the French censorship is far more favorable and less oppressive, some characteristics of the Romanian period of the Vişniecian theater comes to decay: there is no longer a need to hide references to contemporaneity, nor to use allegories, nor the will to oppose the Power. In fact, the vehicular content of his language changes. Various arguments are thus developed on the base of other problems, this time underlying incipient wild capitalism: 'the identity crisis, couple relationships, mass manipulations that lead the Man to become a true "dustbin" of commercial production' (Guccini 2009: 28). In communist Romania, the annihilation was directly attributable to the regime,

whistleblowers, and accomplices, as all the plays of the period point out; now, in European democracies, the disintegration of the ego is individually pursued, and this has repercussions on the Vişniecian theater, no longer through parables but through a more anthropocentric approach.

As for the message and its vehicle, in those years there has been a change/transfer in the Romanian context towards the Western model. As Sanda Cordoş (2003: 48) writes:

Since the 1990's, literature loses its community overload and is freed from its historical, political, and journalistic attributes. Literature then ceases to play the role of holder of truth and the pages of literature books are no longer read with that concise and acute curiosity, reserved for community revelations. This curiosity seems to have naturally moved to the press. Ceasing to be a community discourse with multiple aspects, literature has been forced to reconsider itself (its themes, its recipient, its language and its vision) in the narrowest space of art and to relocate, precisely because of its artistic status, within those frontiers from which literature has always spoken. [...] Literature ceases to promise (and readers don't even ask for it) the door to heaven and the healing or at least the domestication of the fears of a community condemned to blind obedience. On the other hand, it can accept [...] the individual conscience of a reader who approaches it voluntarily and that allows himself to be kidnapped. (Guccini 2018: 7)

In an interview with the director Christian Auger in July 1994, the playwright summarizes the main features of the Romanian phase and the French one in his theater, connecting the first to the "terrestrial" world of opposition to the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu, while the second to the founding and main problems of the Human Being:

For years and years, in Romania, my writing has been imbued with a certain political attitude. And when I say political attitude, you must read protest, social criticism, irony etc. But I have never forgotten, even at the time when it was necessary to undermine the totalitarian system, that a page of novel or theater must, first, have a universal value and a literary value. [...] If now my writing is more oriented on man than on society, if my theater has become a reflection on the stars rather than on the ground (if I speak, therefore, rather of the limits of man as a being rather than of the limits of man as a social individual), it is not because now I feel without opponents. [...] Now, for me, there is an urgency to write about heaven, about the perverse relationships between man and death, between man and immortality, between man and love, man, and the solitude of being. (Guccini 2018: 10)

With this change of urgency there is also the problem of how to translate the Romanian works so that French-speaking recipients could fully understand them even though they had not known the social and sociological drifts that have impregnated these texts. And this is another great challenge of self-translation.

Bilingualism is, in the author, a function of the work, since the writer consciously manifests the intention to build a different style in the new language, both in a compositional sense and in other senses, a style that is both alternative and complementary to that which he adopts in his dramaturgical writing in the first language (from here on out L1). Therefore, we can certainly say, as Emilia David argues, that the phase of full bilingualism forms two original and different editions of the same text, and not just a translation. This

is because Vişniec at this stage has perfectly inserted himself into the French culture while maintaining his old Romanian spirit unchanged. According to Berman's *pure langue* theory, the translation and self-translation of one text from an L1 to an L2 (the second language) leads to a completion and enrichment of the two languages, and consequently of the text itself. Another crucial element is – again in Berman's sense – orality, assimilated to the core of the work's language. It is up to the translation to place it at the center of its interests because the strength of the work consists precisely in the dose of orality that contains. In Vişniec this outcome, achieved intuitively, as the author wants to convince us, shows itself even more fertile in the recent period of his bilingualism, since the transposition takes place towards Romanian, a language with a very generous potential in which the expressiveness of the first version is always destined to increase. Again, another fact of capital importance for the translation is the presence (and the issue) of phonic repetitions and homophonies – the real test bench of translators – and the way of rendering them in other languages. They create a rhythm, which is rarely identical to the one existing in the source text. In his *Poétique du traduire*, Henri Meschonnic reaches the conclusion that orality's rendering is the bet and the *raison d'être* of a poetic of translation. Therefore, the hypothesis of interpreting the writer's bilingualism by means of a poetic of translation is motivated by the extraordinary stylistic and semantic diversity of the transformations putted into practice by Vişniec himself, to mediate the reception of his literature in a second culture. The transformations brought by self-translations tend to be configured as rewriting operations, stylistic elaborations. Michael Oustinoff proposes the interpretation of a writer's bilingualism in relation to the Genettian framework of trans-textuality; the scholar highlights the hypertextual relationships that can be established between the authorial versions existing in the same language or in different idioms of the same work, focusing in his case on Beckettian writing. Analyzing the prose of Samuel Beckett, the scholar Chiara Montini takes up the hypothesis of an intra-intertextual reading, which establishes the coming and going between the linguistic versions of one of her works, specific to the author's writing. The scholar exemplifies by analyzing the techniques of repetition and variation, which seem to proliferate obsessively in Beckett's self-translations and, on the other hand, the procedures of gradual impoverishment, which are also familiar to the bilingual poetics of the Romanian author, especially in the early years of his theatrical writing in France, albeit for strong reasons different from the Beckettian ones. However, according to David, the decisive point of convergence is Matei Vişniec's clear representation of the genesis of his theatre as a bilingual shuttle between texts and cultures. (David 2020: 226-234)

The text is therefore rewritten for needs extraneous to the overall meaning level: editorial, directorial or for scruple of improvement, which can arouse in the author multiples rethinking and improvements, *decantări* (in English: "decantation"), dictated at the time of the re-editions of a work by repeated revisions of a formal and technical order as well as by the shuttle between the two linguistic filters. (David 2011: 50)

In translating from one language to another, there is certainly the risk of losing something intrinsic to the original language: Vişniec tries to maintain, in L2, the aspect that most interests him: the poetic dimension, the onirism. He recognized that linguistic inventiveness is very often lost in translation: in the play *Țara lui Gufi*, which contains many minted words, self-translation into French is almost impossible, as in the case of *Cabaretul cuvintelor*'s puns. Emilia David, in an interview with the author, recognizes, however, that the poetic dimension takes on new connotations in the translation from Romanian to French and vice versa while in the L1 it was not present; Vişniec confirms this peculiarity of his self-translation, answering that it is a 'poeticization' of the autonomous and intuitive fragment that provides new and interesting nuances that pass from one anthropological pole of sensitivity to another. This is also, as David always rightly notes, a founding feature of translation. (David 2015: 589)

In addition to poetics, Matei Vişniec manages, in some cases, to maintain even the rhythm and cadences of some "bars" – borrowing rap slang – as in the case of *Angajare de clown*, even creating rhythmic nuances in French that did not exist in Romanian. Therefore, on the one hand with the translation process something is inevitably lost, while on the other hand new connotations are added. The rhythms derive from the art of counterpoint that the author uses, or the need for there to be a clash between two bars. Often, however, the jokes stretch enormously in the transition from L1 to L2, as the French and Romanian languages are not compatible regarding metric feet. This is how he often resorts to ellipses, rhetorical figures often used by him (and by Beckett), fact that deeply interest him. The ellipse, the reduction of words and entire fragments of texts, is evident in *Spectatorul condamnat la moarte*, where entire repetitive series in Romanian are deleted because they take up an idea already expressed previously. This is because between France and Romania there are two different linguistic styles: when in Romanian repetitions seem only style exercises, in France most redundancies are useless; for this reason, the author had to mask them in other ways, even if the French actors continued to feel excessive redundancy. This is indispensable for the conception of musicality and reasoning (the playwright says that a man who repeats himself is thinking) that Vişniec has. The rhyme is of particular importance – more than in poetry or in novels – in theatre, because aims at scenic effects; in fact, Vişniec thinks, above all, about the scenic representation when he writes, about the actor's breath when he uses the lines, which must create an effect that is either more relaxed or more suffocating according to the stage situation. The rhythm is therefore an inseparable part, together with the poetic message, of the representation that must remain in the translation. (David 2015: 590-591)

An extremely peculiar case of self-translation is always found in *Angajare de clown*, where, both in the Romanian and French versions, there is a phrase in Italian: 'Finita la commedia'. The whole piece is permeated by Fellini's references and therefore by the Italian world; therefore, the syntactic choice certainly seems suitable, but it is not only for this reason. The phrase has, in its Italian meaning more than in the Romanian one, a wider target:



towards actors, towards drama and art in general.<sup>4</sup> It is, once again, a potentializing act towards language on a large scale; just think about the contents and the nuances of the word “comedy” in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* or Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*. (David 2015: 593) Also in the same play, the comparison between the Romanian original and the self-translation reveals not only the different distribution of the didactic indications, but compared to the overall textual extension, also the reduction or even the suppression of more detailed specifications regarding gestures and scenic actions against the actors, which in the Romanian original are outlined with greater precision the starting directorial situation. These dramaturgical procedures can be translated by textual level into verbal ellipses, into a lesser adjectival and nominal determination and into the option on the semantic level for hypernymy, the substitution with the hypernym, which designates an extensive class of objects, to the detriment of the hyponyms, tending to indicate a narrower class. In other words, a more general designation of the notions is preferred to the more specific one. (David 2011: 54)

The bilingual work of the author is generated through countless filtrations and transfers, both linguistic and cultural and aspires to a progressive constitution of itself. (David 2013: 261) It is important to underline how being poised between two languages enhances the fragments of text by providing them with different meanings, connotations, allusions depending on the recipient (David 2020: 228), also through ellipses, the conscious suppression of words or entire sequences due to cultural differences between French and Romanian viewers (David 2015: 590-591). In addition, ‘cultural differences can be expressed, in the author’s intention, also through the ‘naturalization’ of denominations (toponyms, anthroponyms or others) or situations with a meaning limited to a given culture from an anthropological and sociological point of view’ (David 2020: 229), as in *L’histoire des ours pandas racontée par un saxophoniste qui a une petite amie à Francfort* (1993) where the use of some Romanian terms in the play in French gives a certain exoticism to the protagonist.

The same process of semantic translation between two worlds, although on a fictional level, is narrated by Dana Monah when she describes the composition of the play *De la sensation d’élasticité lorsqu’on marche sur des cadavres*, which also sees inside a fictitious rewriting by the characters:

micro-pieces are rewrites of other pieces, namely the fictional worlds they postulate are variants of the fictional worlds constructed by the source texts, they ‘present states of things partly homologous to those of M’ (Lavocat 2010). They therefore represent possible worlds of M, since they recycle his fabula and his characters, modify in part his data, impose on him values that are foreign to him. The particularity of shows-rewriting prisoners consists in the fact that the world of reference, the real world in the text, which preexists the rewriting (the latter tries, in principle, to make it forget, or to relegate it to the background), will not fail to infiltrate the second fictional world, to contaminate it, to deconstruct it. Thus, in Vişniec as in Visky Andras, the fictional universe generated by the

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<sup>4</sup> About the peculiar use of Italian words, mostly connected with the deepest meanings of “commedia”, inside *Angajare de clown*, I suggest reading in detail David (2011: 47-77).

rewriting is a hybrid, a (partial) superposition of worlds: a world M' or Wf (to use Anne Ubersfeld's terminology), which would be a variant of the proto world (the one built by a "normal" show), is contaminated by the reference world of *La Sensation... or Disciples*. Vişniec suggests this superposition of worlds when he notes in the didascalies 'dream mixed with reality'. The modalities whose real world in the text invades the world of rewriting reflect, in the two playwrights, the means whose rewriting modifies the source work, of which it makes him say something else. (Monah 2012: 65-66)

It is clear as day, in the wake of this observation, that Vişniec is so interested and fascinated by this phenomenon that he founded a play on this almost-like-clockwork mental (and anthropological) mechanism; it seems to me that Vişniec imagine it like a set of gears, and by moving a linguistical gear (seen as a literal world in this play), another one starts moving and so on.

### Conclusions

I hope to have shown, in the wake of the studies I have cited, how the translation process operated by an author like Matei Vişniec – a man both French and Romanian alike – from an L1 to an L2 not only captures the physical plane of writing and semantic transposition, but how it creates a bridge between two different cultures, in this case one that has known the communist dictatorship and the other, the French one of course, that has not known it and sees this form of dictatorship in a certainly different light. But the linguistical differences are not only at a political level: the entire everyday world that must be transposed into another language must be made usable and understandable for the recipient, and this happens in the ways that Vişniec uses and that we have described above: culturally transforming the message or giving appropriate explanations for the receiving actors in the director's notes.

In the author this interpenetration of worlds is also clearly rendered, on a fictitious scale, in the melting of real world, proto world and fictional world in *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsq'on marche sur des cadavres*, as Dana Monah eloquently exposed in her aforementioned article. The act of translation is therefore, in my opinion, a cultural act, global in the true sense of the word.

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