

THE TWO SCRIVENERS

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Abstract: This paper has been conceived as some kind of a conundrum project, the first part of which contains a description of most of the narrative contracts in two celebrated novellas, and a second part revealing the names of the two great authors, one Russian—Gogol, and one American—Melville. The starting point was provided by the fact that both stories have as their central character a copyist or scrivener, an antihero connected with the process of writing and illustrating the two authors' discontent with their reception in an age that might be seen as the dawn—or even pre-dawn—of modernism (first defined as the period of the typewriter). Similitudes and differences between the two novellas are recorded, in a comparative effort meant to demonstrate that both become more relevant as they are set one against the other.

Keywords: antihero, Melville, Gogol, scrivener, skaz

It just so happened that two great writers, whose careers had reached maturity at about the dawn or pre-dawn of modernism, decided to write a great novella each dedicated to an antihero whose occupation had marked the evolution of written culture for many centuries, even millenia; the copyist or scrivener. This double event is the more remarkable, first because the two writers came from two entirely different cultures, where, however, the copyists seemed to enjoy similar destinies and reputations. Secondly, their deaths at the end of each story—though they may remain to be haunting their communities, and mankind in general, for some time—may be seen as symbolic for the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, that of the typewriter; and the typewriter has often been associated with literary modernism, just as much as postmodernism has come to be viewed as the age of the word-processor.

Roughly speaking, the 1860s brought about the real end of a class of people that our two writers chose as their antiheroes before modernism proper came into being; the antihero himself may be regarded as a feature of modernism, side by side with a number of other such elements; the theme of alienation (and that of writing), the complex relationships between narrator and reader, the use of symbolic projections, illogical and absurd elements, etc. One of our authors defends his case from the very beginning of his celebrated story of B: “I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem to be an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law-copyists, or scriveners.” He was wrong (the narrator, we mean) as only a decade before (in 1842, and we are now in 1853), on the other side of the globe, another great writer had published the story of A, who was also an interesting and somewhat singular copyist.

What we find typically modernist—and even postmodernist—is that these two

writers, who had reached the height of their careers by the time each gave his famous novella decided to focus on writing as such, something they really knew things about; one had already published in 1851 one of the greatest masterpieces ever in English—and not only—, the other had been described as “the greatest artist that Russia has yet produced.”

This is probably the appropriate place to return to our title and say that we decided for “The Two Scriveners” since it more appropriately sustains the organization of the paper, which we thought of structuring in the form of a conundrum, the first part of which is the puzzle itself and the solution as the second part. This is connected with the fact that in another text (*Between Critical Thinking and Literary Critical Thinking*, 2013) we attempted to prove that not only critical thinking, but even literary critical thinking may precede creative thinking, so that here we propose a hypothetical inversion by taking these two great writers, who, again, are at the climax of their careers, and who decide to bitterly contemplate their own lives as writers by this ironic diminution of their personalities into transcribers, i.e. copyists or copiers, imitators, scribes, pen-pushers, people employed to make written copies of real documents and manuscripts and most often working for kings, nobles, temples, monasteries, or cities; especially in the 19th-century, when, as we have pointed out, they were rendered obsolete by the invention of the typewriter, they were fixtures in offices throughout the world.

And thus, the two settings have to be sometime around the middle of the 19th-century in one of each nation’s largest cities; the office space might be more or less prominent in the story, but the large city is important, as it makes each individual life less significant in proportion to its size; so, basically, a (capital) city of a large nation, be it American or Russian or Chinese... In our two cases, it is New York and St. Petersburg: the former as the bustling center of business and finance, the second as czarist Russia’s capital between 1712 and 1918 (in the story, during the reign of Czar Nicholas, 1825-1855), both of them centers of corporate or government offices that required armies of bureaucrats and, therefore, copyists; the modernist anomaly in both cases is that of the inactive antihero in the middle of a busy financial, political or administrative district. In one case we know that the season is that of winter (a season of irony and satire in Northrop Frye’s typology), as the main character needs an overcoat and finally gets one only to have it stolen from him. Interestingly enough, one of the characters working with the B scrivener, because he wore “execrable coats,” is presented by the narrator with “a highly respectable-looking coat of /his/ own—a padded gray coat, of a most comfortable warmth, and which buttoned straight up from the knee to the neck”—thus, an overcoat, and thus winter in New York as well. And, again strikingly, the address of the office is a matter of discretion: the omniscient narrator in one speaks about “the department of..., but I had better not mention in what department... and call the department of which we are speaking a certain department,” while the character-narrator in the other lets us know that his “chambers were upstairs, at No—Wall Street,” then he moved “at No—Wall Street” while these were taken over by “Mr. B--, landlord of No—.” So, even if we knew New York and St. Petersburg very well, we could not find our “no-number” antiheroes.

As far as their names are concerned, the two authors adopted different attitudes, but both showing an explicit interest in making them unusual; the author of “Shinel” favors a despicable, “strange and far-fetched name” that might mean “Poop Poopson,” or “Crap

Crapman,” or any other scatological pun, though traced to its Greek etymological origin it surprisingly turns out to mean “harmless” or “forgiving,” with both connotations applying to Akaky; the author of *B* prefers just one name for his antihero and “the Scrivener” as some kind of surname, or nickname, which is true, as we shall see, for the other characters in the novella.

But before looking more closely at our scribes, let us take a more distant perspective and see how they came to be what they are. The time we are contemplating is thus a little before and around the middle of the 19th-century, when writing had been and was being regarded, at least in some quarters, as some kind of heroic action. After Shelley ended his celebrated essay on poetry calling poets, writers in general, “the unacknowledged legislators of mankind”, a little later, in 1841, Thomas Carlyle developed his “great men theory” (in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*), including Dante, Shakespeare, Johnson, Rousseau, Burns and others among the great heroes of humanity. Dissatisfaction and frustration with their writings’ reception must have brought great authors to look as the “snivelling neurotic wreck and ineffectual weenie” (Atwood, XVIII), as “the antihero as man of letters” (our *A* loves to work, and “in that copying, he saw a varied and agreeable world. Enjoyment was written on his face: some letters were favorites with him; and when he encountered them, he became unlike himself; he smiled and winked...,” i.e. he was a man of letters, just as *B* had also been—before entering the story—a man of “letters” in a different way.”)

But the antihero (as distinct from the dark hero or the villain) appeared to critics and theorists as a flawed hero, and thus, probably, more interesting than the traditional heroes; even though working on the side of the good (and scribes do that), they have a tragic flaw; they may be wretches, jerks, outsiders, but also morally ambiguous, complicated, and unapologetically imperfect; they may wonder about their own sanity (others do in the case of *B*), but harbor no illusions as to their place in the world; they may be pathetic, mean, dumb, clownish, ugly, but at the same time always do the right thing, whether others oppose of it or not; though conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities, they are intriguing and occupy a central place in the story and in the world; having tortured minds and souls, they might be said to be always doing the right things for the wrong reasons; though they appeared on stage since the time of the Greek dramatists, they only came to prominence later, especially in modernism. Their many (or not so many) imperfections result in helplessness, confusion and/or self-hatred.

So, back to *A* and *B*, our antiheroes, to see if and how they fit the above descriptions or suggestions. The former is “a clerk of whom it cannot be said that he was very remarkable: he was short, somewhat pockmarked, with rather reddish hair and rather dim, bleary eyes, with a small bald patch in the top of his head, with wrinkles on both sides of the cheeks and the sort of complexion that is usually associated with haemorrhoids...” About this unattractive character, we also find, that he is “a man advanced in years,” who seems to “have been born a copying clerk” or a “perpetual titular councillor”; no surprise then that he has bits and pieces of filth on his clothes due to his “peculiar knack, as he walked in the street, of arriving beneath a window when all sorts of rubbish was being flung out”. However, not only did he live in a “world of his own,” but also “lived in his work,” and was absorbed to the point of obsession in it; even at home he continues to write

documents, or to copy whatever he could lay hands on. And, although at the office he “never makes a mistake,” his co-workers pick on him and ridicule him, nobody respects him and “even the porter refuses to rise when he passes.” Nevertheless, he ignores his taunters and behaves as though there were no one there, very much like a childlike character who prefers to endure all verbal bullying from colleagues. This workaholic suffers very much like a saint, too, with just “Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?” in which other words are heard, like “I am your brother” and we can easily remember Jesus’s last words to his tormentors, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

A’s Russian dream is, quite appropriately if we think of the winter in this part of the world, that of having a new overcoat instead of his old, threadbare, frayed one (he dresses rather shabbily anyway); for that he has to scrimp for months and even has to fast to save for his coat, again like Christ fasting for forty days and forty nights in the desert whilst being tempted by the devil, i.e. our coatmaker Petrovitch; this seems to change him from the introverted, hopeless nonentity that he has been all his life into one whose self-esteem and expectations are raised by the overcoat. There are two more interesting things to remember about A; first, this meek and awkward Russian John Doe “was in the habit of not finishing his sentences” (as compared to his counterpart who grew into the habit of using just one sentence); and secondly, again as a rather accidental parallel to B, when asked to do another task not included, as it were, in his job description, he prefers not to, which might simply be an indication of the intellectual limitations of his mind, rather than a blunt form of refusal.

This very refusal—otherwise very gentle, mild and polite—is the main characteristic of our second copier; B is basically a “dead soul”—to use the description in another title of the Russian counterpart. As he enters the American story, unlike—to some extent—his Petersburg contemporary—, this antihero is young, “pallidly neat,” “pitiably respectable,” “incurably forlorn” and of a “singularly sedate” aspect. But, like A, he is “always there” with his incessant industry in an “extraordinary quantity of writing,” with great stillness, honesty and unalterableness of demeanor. He seems firm and self-possessed, methodical in his wonderful mildness, pallid haughtiness and austere reserve, always unaccountable in his cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance (“like a very ghost...” constantly parallels the Russian copyist’s real transformation into a ghost in the end of the story). Anyway, as the narrative unfolds, B becomes, for the narrator and the other characters, the “strange creature” who is “a little lunny”(sic) or “derranged” as his co-workers described him. As he “seemed to gorge himself on... documents,” B appears more and more clearly as the victim of an innate and incurable disorder (with classic symptoms of depression), and, consequently, a real “nuisance” and a mystery, “one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable...,” except, probably, that he is almost autistic. In the second part of the story, very much like A, he “really” becomes a ghost that haunts the office premises and causes continual dismay in the narrator.

Like in the case of A, B “remained as ever, a fixture...,” becoming a “millstone to /the narrator/,” as in Jesus’s admonishment against anyone offending the little ones, that it would be better for them that a millstone were hanged about his neck (“Matthew 18”); the Biblical references continue with the lawyer’s memory of John C. Colt (brother of the inventor of the revolver) who bludgeoned Samuel Adams to death with a hatchet (“this old Adam” in the previous paragraph); and then the lawyer’s denial of B, which seems

analogous to Peter's denial of Christ in "Matthew 14:68, 70-71"—"In mercy's name, who is he?"...; or the narrator's feeling that "for a few moments /he/ was turned into a pillar of salt" (like the disobedient wife of Lot who, for her transgression, was turned into a pillar of salt); or, at his death, when he is found between two thieves in prison (Jesus's crucifixion alongside two thieves), when he comes to be "at rest with Kings and Counsellors of the Earth, which built desolate places for themselves..." ("Job 3:14-15"), after having inspired in the lawyer "a fraternal melancholy" ("We are brothers!") from the "bond of common humanity," for "both I and B were sons of Adam," and he recalls the divine injunction "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another."

Finally, B's American dream—which becomes the narrator's nightmare—is that of being able to say "No!" to absolutely everything, as an indication of his absolute freedom, embodied in a stock response, in a quiet and gracious manner as a matter of fact—"I would prefer not to". It would be interesting to speculate as to what he would have answered if somebody had asked him if he wanted to be dead (we compulsorily remember, together with a rumor that reached the narrator at the end, about his having previously worked in a "dead letter office"—the emblem of human nature and the plight of failing—in a writer, of course); and he dies of starvation, at The Tombs, "strangely huddled at the base of the wall.". And thus, life is pointless—"I would prefer not to," as a trademark sentence ringing ominously all over the world.

So, what we have so far, is two copyists created, as projections of the writers themselves, by two great authors who wrote these two novellas at the climax of their careers, which just happened to be when they were about thirty-three years old. What remains for us to do is have a look at the other narrative contracts that they used in order to project these two "waifs" into the foreground. First, it is the other characters, selected according to two principles: they should be limited in number and the presence of women, if any, should be reduced to a minimum (female characters most often imply love stories and families, both of which are incompatible with the essence of antiheroes; and there are, we might say, in both stories, faint homosexual undertones).

This "chorus" is represented by the nameless co-workers who always taunted, jeered and made jokes at A; they also scattered bits of paper on his head and told all sorts of stories of their own invention about him (like, for instance, how his landlady beat him); the overcoat, of course, is a butt for their jibes; among these employees, there is one who comes with the advice for A to see a certain prominent personage in a government office who will help him track down his stolen coat; this prominent personage is a high-ranking general who proves to be a person of little consequence, the caricature of the typical bureaucrat who practiced his gestures and mimic before the looking glass and who, in the end, also proves to be the corrupt and immoral representative of a contemptible but dangerous class of civil servants. There are also other government officials and watchmen (the "men with moustaches"), and a physician called after A develops throat infection and who tells his landlady to order a coffin for her tenant. But there is also Grigori Petrovitch, once a serf and now a heavy-drinking, one-eyed tailor, and his plain looks, no-name witchy wife, associated with the smell of onions.

On the other hand, B's co-workers are also nameless, but they have such nicknames like Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut (the twelve-year old office boy who brings

such cakes to the two scribes above)—all of them caricatures, but of a different type than the “person of consequence,” for instance. Turkey is this story’s elderly drunk, who is productive in the mornings, but sloshed in the afternoon, while young Nippers, plagued by ambition and indigestion, is irritable and angry in the morning and calmer in the afternoon; Turkey is always a mess, Nippers is always unhappy—two odd-ball co-workers, never in a bad mood at the same time, so that the narrator can notice this “good natural arrangement” by which “when Nippers was on, Turkey was off and vice-versa.” Worth noting is, first, that Nippers often received visits from ambiguous looking fellows in seedy coats (though he himself “dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way”) and, second, that Turkey wore such execrable coats (see above) that the narrator thinks of offering him an almost new overcoat of his own. Then there are the new tenants when the narrator decides to move out, the landlord, and the grub-man, one of the turnkeys at the Tombs, who awaits and accepts bribe to make sure B is well fed.

Now we can introduce the two narrators through whom all these characters—and the whole narrative substance indeed—are brought before the readers’ eyes. Recent theories tell us that, from the point of view of the place of the narrative voice (extratextual or intratextual), any narrative may correspondingly be heterodiegetic (the story is filtered through a narrator who is not a character in the story—the case of the Russian novella) or homodiegetic (the story is told by a narrator who is also one of the story characters—the case of the American novella). Next we will also need to observe the distinctions proposed as far back as the 1960s by Wayne C. Booth between reliable and unreliable narrators (with the footnote that complete reliability never exists). Even though in different positions with regard to the story, our two narrators, as we shall see, share at least three characteristics in common: their partial omniscience, their unreliability, and their skaz (Russian formalist concept) type of relationship to the reader, all of which are certainly interconnected.

As a fictional person distinct from the author, but constituting an indisputable organizational center (Eichenbaum), the Russian narrator seems to be omniscient, but is, in fact, quite limited; this may originate in the author’s combination of registers and genres, particularly oral story-telling and the lives of saints (that he was specifically interested in); this results in a relaxed, chatty, familiar, lowbrow style, characterizing the narrator as ramble, fickle, and Protean, frequently using such parenthetical expressions as “nothing is known of that,” or “I don’t remember from what town,” or “if my memory serves me right...”; he also delights in verbal play by using informal asides that repeatedly compromise his reliability; he thus speaks, from the very beginning, of “a certain department..., but I had better not mention in what department...”; and introduces “a police captain of what town I don’t recollect...”; or “it is impossible to say...” Moreover, at one point he as much as admits he is making up information (about the tailor) simply to fulfil the reader’s expectation that every character gets a description (“it is now the rule that the character of every person in a novel must be completely drawn...”). And in the end we listen to him commenting on “the fantastic ending of this perfectly true story,” as “rumors were suddenly floating about Petersburg” that a corpse... etc., etc. The skaz-characteristics are given by such addresses as: “the reader may see for himself...”; “it must be noticed that...”; “the reader ought to know...”; “we regret to say that we cannot tell...”; “it is our business to criticize...”; or “even I who tell the tale must own that I have not troubled to

inquire...”

Being himself a character in the story, the American narrator—though an experienced lawyer and, thus, one who is supposed to know very much about scriveners—is by definition limited: “all I know of him... is what my own astonished eyes saw...,” though, very much like his Russian predecessor, he believes that “some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding...” Also, many passages in the text question his reliability; his vanity, for instance, prompts him to mention three times the name of his acquaintance John Jacob Astor (US’s first multimillionaire) to show us how important he himself is; but, in fact, he remains in the reader’s mind as an elderly Manhattan lawyer who goes unnamed to the end of the story, who tries but fails to connect with B, and who is convinced “that the easiest way of life is the best” (only to be contradicted by the development of the story and of the main character); he remains torn between feelings of responsibility for B and his desire to be rid of the threat that B poses to the office and to his way of life on Wall Street; he is a smug, sanctimonious, cautious, distrustworthy drone who is prepared to admit that “a certain squeamishness withheld /him/...” The “skaz” qualities of the narrative are revealed in such comments as: “the reader of nice perceptions will here perceive that Turkey and Nippers...”; or “there would seem little need for proceeding further in this history...,” and “ere parting with the reader...” towards the end. Like the other narrator, the New York lawyer also professes his ignorance of key details of the narrative.

And two passing remarks on the tone of these narrators; the unnamed narrator in the Russian tale is, at various times condescending, compassionate, humorous or nightmarish, with a subtle current of oddness, irony and a slightly wry angle ; the unnamed narrator in the American tale, seeing B as either pathetic or frightening, oscillates between a tone of profound confusion and one of profound sadness.

With settings, characters and narrators in place, the two writers have to choose from among a number of possible plots or narrative patterns; let us mention here that we take plot, as most critics do, as the logical and causal structure of a story (which consists in the chronological sequence of events), and the narrative pattern as the concrete realization of the plot. In the 19th-century our two writers would have certainly known about Aristotle’s plot, which he called *mythos*, i.e. the structure of incidents and actions; this structure is made up of exposition, rising action (through conflict), climax (*peripeteia* or turning point), falling action, and resolution or catastrophe—denouement. Their key elements consist in reversals (A manages to persuade Petrovitch to make a new coat for him; A goes to see the man of consequence; the coat is stolen; A dies and becomes a ghost; B starts refusing everything; B moves on the premises; narrator moves out; B gets into prison and dies...), recognitions, suffering or *pathos* (A’s suffering and the B narrator’s torment), and *anagnorisis* (realization of the cause of his/their misery or a way to be released from the misery which in both our cases is in death).

A somewhat parallel pattern is the one created by symbols or networks of symbols, and one cannot expect two great writers to avoid it, as it may be said to have formed the core of writing since the beginnings of literature. The title symbol of the Russian story is, first, a patchwork of scraps sewn together, giving the antihero the Orthodox image and precept according to which the less you have in this world, the closer you will be to

eternal happiness. Since the overcoat is beyond repair and cannot be fixed (by the devil himself, called here Petrovitch), the message may be that religion does not pay. Otherwise, the overcoat is a token of status and security and a metaphor for human isolation and alienation, for the delusion of hope; more generally, it becomes a symbol for Russia whose humanity has worn thin; it also may appear as a mythic symbol representing a single, simple man's life, and, since in Russian "shinel" is feminine, at the very end of A's life he was visited by "a gleam of brightness in the form of an overcoat" and "his whole existence had in a sense become fuller, as though he had married;" it is "a sweet helpmate" and "the dear wife of his." The new overcoat is thus a form of rebirth that, however, requires sacrifices. Since in the end A "gave up the ghost" and became a "corpse," the author uses this denouement as a means of parodying literary convention; moreover, the ghost attacks the very important person as a representation of lower classes' revolt towards a new Russia, though "orders were given... to catch the corpse... alive or dead" (with a smack, here, of Caragiale); this roving corpse, who may stand for divine retribution or the furies in ancient Greek mythology, bedeviling the evildoers, finally finds an overcoat and takes it from the person of consequence before he/it vanishes "again."

Consistently enough, as it were, in the American story B, who is from the beginning of a cadaverous expression and a corpse-like disposition, appears gradually more like "a ghost..., an apparition..., a cadaver..."; in some kind of Kafkaesque absurdism, the narrator himself feels haunted by B; at times he feels he could walk straight against him as if he were air; and, moreover, B. haunts us, his readers, thus somehow avenging his "father" against the world that did not understand him (i.e. the author). Then, not only are the offices on "Wall Street," but there is also a dead wall outside the office that B always contemplates, and there is a prison wall at "The Tombs," where he ends his existence as a character. And, once again, the author gives us a rumor at the end as to B's having previously worked in a "Dead Letter Office," thus obliquely commenting not only on the copied "letters" that was the scrivener's job, but also on the interrupted channel of communication—like the author not finding his readers.

As usual, all these add up to the theme(s) of the stories; the Russian novella is, first, a commentary on the barrage of bureaucracy and an implicit condemnation of the arrogance that most often accompanies bureaucratic ambition and bureaucratic incompetence; as a representative of the unappreciated and unrewarded underclass, A ironically dies of a broken heart, but the author's belief is that the human soul cannot ever truly rest or be at peace, so the antihero returns from the dead with a vengeance; he will stay forever as the epitome of the doomed clerk in a haunted, phantasmagorical city, who, however, will ultimately rise above his persecutors as a utopian wish fulfillment in the finale of the story. On the other hand, the story of B is a parable of what his author saw as the dangers of the modern world, that is the threat of alienation and of too much individualism, as his antihero appears as a "self-unmade man."

As our conundrum project is drawing to a close, we may look at our two authors and their "stories." Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1809-1852) published his "Overcoat" in 1842, after a series of works including Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, Arabesques (with "Diary of a Madman"), The Government Inspector and Dead Souls, and established his reputation as a fabulist of the highest order, who suspends the laws of nature for the sake of

the fantastic in terms that make the real in itself seem uncanny, absurd, barbaric. Of his great story we attempted to comment upon, Dostoevsky (Turgenev according to other sources) may have said: “We all come out of Gogol’s ‘Overcoat.’” Sometime later comes Nabokov’s accolade: “When, as in his immortal ‘The Overcoat,’ Gogol really let himself go and potted happily on his private abyss, he became the greatest artist that Russia has yet produced.” (p.140) Romanticism and realism, tragedy and comedy, compassion and grotesque are all combined into an early example of magical realism initially titled “A Tale About a Clerk Who Steals Overcoats” (and the clerk is Akaky Akakyevitch Bashmaktchkin—“bashmak”=footwear)—a strange tale about an inconsequential man and his cat-fur coat ending in the fairy-tale world of supernatural revenge. It was several times translated into English (beginning in 1850) and the version we used is signed by Constance Garnett.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) published anonymously his “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” in 1853 (later included in The Piazza Tales, 1856), after (between 1846 and 1852) Typee, Omoo, Mardi, Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby –Dick and Pierre (the last but one sold only thirty copies and the last was met with similar disastrous reception); after that Melville stopped publishing fiction, drifted into obscurity, wrote some poetry, and worked for the Customs House until 1891. Jonathan Edwards (Freedom of the Will, 1754) and Joseph Priestley (Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated, 1777) are alluded to in the story as possible sources of inspiration (free will requires the will to be isolated from the moment of decision; and the will is not free), and it thus becomes, at the early beginnings of modernism, a commentary on the human condition.

Finally, these are two stories that, at first reading, are as different as they can be, i.e. as different as the two cultures they belong to, but which upon closer readings have so many common elements that we can certainly group them together, especially since they come from two disappointed writers who project themselves unto two copiers.

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