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Writing the unconscious: psychoanalysis for the creative writer

Abstract
This paper addresses a set of related questions pertaining to the potential usefulness of psychoanalysis for the creative writer, why write, and what is writing in particular. Further, it teases out what a pedagogy of creative writing as a 'practice of the letter' (Lacan 1965: 193) might be in the specific context of writing workshops aimed specifically at MA students studying at the university.

Writing never explains anything to me - it only shows me how stupendously complicated everything is.
(Gerald Murnane)

'Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms,' Freud once famously said (Freud 1928: 441). However, the work of artists and creative writers holds a prominent position for the articulation of the psychoanalytic discourse. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan indeed remarked that for Freud 'the artist always precedes him, … he does not have to play the psychologist where the artist paves the way for him' (1965: 192-93). Nor did Lacan, for that matter, who had the gall to call himself a poem, and what is more, 'a poem that is being written' (Lacan 1977-78: 81; 1979: viii). In fact, Lacan's later teaching scandalously assimilates psychoanalysis to poetry, i.e., to a game whose meaning is always doubled by the signifier: literal meaning and figurative meaning, lexical meaning and contextual meaning is what poetry exploits, says Lacan, in order to wreak violence on language. What the later Lacan exploits is language's excess, the part of language that 'escapes the linguist's attention' (Lecercle 1990: 5) as well as the philologist's attention, because this extreme dimension of language hinges on what Lacan calls the real, i.e., that which is beyond representation, by way of the letter. To a certain extent, this insistence on the letter lifts the many contradictions, paradoxes and flounderings that usually arise when psychoanalysis encounters the arts because it highlights the relationship between knowledge, truth and jouissance.

In my engagement with the fields of creative writing and psychoanalysis, I have asked myself a set of related questions pertaining to the potential usefulness of psychoanalysis for the creative writer. Themes inherent in these
questions revolve around the following. Why do I write? What is writing? Why do I write what I write? Because I teach both writing and psychoanalysis, there is an other side to this set of related questions: it concerns pedagogy. In particular, it concerns the teaching of creative writing as a 'practice of the letter' (Lacan 1965: 193) enhanced by psychoanalytic techniques aimed specifically at MA students studying at university.

The (eaub)scene of writing - obscene or beautiful?

Why write? 'Writing is bad enough,' answers Margaret Atwood, 'but writing about writing is surely worse, in the futility department' (Atwood 2002: xvi). Still, there are many famous answers to this question, some more flippant than others. Gerald Murnane, for instance, altogether evades the question by declaring that he'd be 'a fool' if he pretended he could answer it (2005: 29).

If I were, however, to answer the question for myself, I would say: 'I write to answer incipient questions that trouble my mind'. Or 'I write to relieve some form of anxiety, the question of anxiety being the unanswerable question par excellence, since the object cause of anxiety, the shadow of Das Ding, cannot be symbolized' (Hecq 2005). In this sense, I write because I must do so, exhilarating, detestable or painful though this might be. That writing is my jouissance, the paradoxical satisfaction that I derive from my symptom and the excesses of an enjoyment that is closer to pain than pleasure, would hardly be surprising. But the question then arises concerns the status of this symptom and the place of the real - hence the vexed question of pathology. Might my writing be a mere symptom, or does it fulfil some more fundamental need, as Joyce's sinthome does by way of a littering of the letter?

From Freud to Lacan, psychoanalysis offers a range of viewpoints on creativity. It is Lacan, however, who eradicates the dualism 'gifted' or 'sick' in his work on Joyce in particular, since the question of Joyce's madness remains a rhetorical one (Lacan 1975-76: 87). The following offers some positions on creativity with regard to this vexed question of pathology as one would in a workshop, i.e., with a view to further discussion.

In his Autobiographical Study, Freud speaks of 'the realm of the imagination' as a "reservation" made during the painful transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle in order to provide a substitute for instinctual satisfaction which had to be given up in real life' (Freud 1925: 64). He thereby admits that it is possible, through recreation, to escape the constraints of reality, an escapist process that is wonderfully detailed in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), where daydreaming and fantasising gradually give way to writing. Freud, however, does not say that writing is an escapist symptom. Nor does he name the place in which creative or cultural experiences are to be located, though it must be said that as early as 1908, he wrote, somewhat infantilizing the creative writer:

Every child at play becomes like a creative writer, in that he recreates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him. It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the
contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. (Freud 1908: 132)

The British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) deserves credit for deepening our understanding of this notion of creative and cultural experience by discerning, alongside psychic reality and external reality, a third space, a play space which he calls 'potential space' and which he locates between the individual and the environment - originally between the child and the mother. This space is, for him, the condition of the truth of the subject. This is perhaps as close to Lacan as Winnicott ever comes, i.e., the Lacan for whom truth means 'truth effects that are not at one with his or her prejudices but which result from what he or she has been for the Other' (Gueguin 2006: 265).

Interestingly, while Freud thinks in terms of psychic reality and drives, Winnicott speaks of a search for the self, with the attendant risk of self-loss. In emphasizing the fact that the child creates the object, just as Freud's hungry infant hallucinates the mother's breast, which can be re-found later on, Winnicott shows the crucial significance of the stage at which the child loses all feelings of omnipotence and he notes the importance of the symbolization produced by these initial mechanisms of creation and imagination.

In his study on 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (1949), Lacan speaks of the 'crossroads' that introduces the child to human desire. This is the child's confrontation, at around six months, with his or her mirror image, and the ensuing jubilation at recognizing himself or herself as distinct from the other. For, as Francoise Dolto has remarked (Dolto 1981), the child at first does not have the object; he or she is it: the lost object is the self. It is only after the mirror stage that the subject becomes a 'me for you', a 'me with you'. The 'crossroads' Lacan alludes to is the precursor to the symbolic castration effected by the child's entry into the world of language, the castration psychoanalysts go on about as it is an operation that all speaking beings keep renegotiating throughout their lives - as do creative writers in particular.

Following on from Winnicott, writing is not a formation of the unconscious, and therefore not a symptom per se. Indeed, the ability to overcome the separations, bereavements, aggressions and other traumas of childhood through creativeness is not given to everyone. To overcome trauma by creating an artefact that may have artistic value is to re-create the initial experience of distress, and there are people who, despite their potential, never manage to produce anything or to free themselves from what was, for them, destructive in the first place. For some, there is no place left for fantasy, and hallucinations break through: a process that Patrick White brilliantly dramatizes in the central section of The Aunt's Story (1948) where Theodora Goodman, who once longed to be a poet, experiences a psychotic crisis and finds herself invaded by auditory and tactile hallucinations instead.

Nevertheless, for psychoanalysis, it would seem that one often writes to overcome some childhood trauma that may be revived by some later loss in what might be called a restaging of castration. In some uncanny encounter, Lacan would agree with Freud and Winnicott. So would Melanie Klein
(1934), Freud's most vocal detractor. And so would Hélène Cixous (1977; 1993), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1987), Lacan's own detractors. They would, however, each tackle the problem from different angles; witness for instance Kristeva's book *Black Sun* (1989; original 1987) and her paper on the melancholic imaginary, where writing is a form of therapy that enhances a healing of primitive narcissistic wounds, as opposed to Lacan's seminar on James Joyce (1975-76) where writing is constitutive of the ego - is, indeed, the ego. Whereas the symptom originates in a desperate attempt to know and control oneself, the *sinthome* can be said to be the locus of becoming of the ego. The term *sinthome* itself is, as Lacan points out in his 1975-76 seminar on James Joyce, an archaic way of writing what is now spelled *symptome* in French. Lacan reads Joyce's writing as replacing a symptom, but uses the archaic form of the term (punning on symptom, saint and St Tomas) to signify Joyce's special relation to language. Indeed, Lacan's thesis is that Joyce managed to avoid psychosis by deploying his art, i.e., as that which prevented him from falling apart. However this replacement device is more than a symptom, for it produces something new. Whether one pathologizes writing or not, writing fulfils an anchoring function for some writers, i.e., those for whom writing is a practice of the letter. The question remains to show how these competing viewpoints address this concept of anchoring.

In 'The Paths to Symptom Formation' Freud questions the creative endeavour in terms of the psychical process at play. He claims that the artist is someone 'who achieves *through* his fantasy what originally the subject had achieved *in* his fantasy' (Freud 1901: 424). And indeed, in 'Creative Writers and Day-dreaming', he also suggests that creative writing is a mediation between the conscious fantasies present in daydreams and the unconscious fantasies experienced in night-dreams (1908: 136). Thus what is more likely to be achieved for the neurotic, when his aspirations seek fulfilment *in* his fantasy, is a symptom: the symptom for which fantasies provide motivating forces and signifying constellations. Symptoms are referred to here as 'Acts detrimental, or at least useless, to the subject's life as a whole, often complained of by him as unwelcome and bringing unpleasure or suffering to him' (1901: 404).

Freud seems to suggest that artists are able to make a different use of the unconscious; as such, we can contrast the uselessness of symptoms with the use artists make of their fantasies in the production of socially valued objects. This, perhaps, is the 'special' gift that writers have, the gift that allows them to 'mould' fantasies 'into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality' (Freud 1911: 216). Considering that there remains something of what is 'useless' in relation to the fantasy, in the work of art there is also that which is able to pass, to enter into circulation. Freud writes:

A man who is a true artist has more at his disposal. In the first place, he understands how to work over his day-dreams in such a way as to make them lose what is too personal about them and repels strangers, and to make it possible for others to share in their enjoyment of them. He understands, too, how to tone them down so that they do not easily betray their origin from proscribed sources. (1901: 423-24)
Thus, in regard to Freud we can claim that the artist is someone who is able at once to make use of and raise a screen to the personal. The artist forges a different relation to what originates from 'proscribed sources', and thereby also to his or her unconscious at work. Moreover, for Freud the artist is also 'special' because 'he or she is able both to give and to experience pleasure to a greater extent than others (Kaufman 1991: 6).

Lacan affirms Freud's appreciation of the artist as preceding him, while also articulating a response to a predominant mode of writing about literature and authors by psychoanalysts. In 1965 Lacan writes, 'Attributing an author's avowed technique to some neurosis: boorishness. Or again, by showing it to be an explicit adoption of certain mechanisms which would thereby make an unconscious edifice of it: stupidity' (1965: 192).

This statement is made in the context of his homage to Marguerite Duras, of whom he says, she 'knows, without me, what I teach' (Lacan 1965: 193). In his comments on her book *Le ravissement de Lol V Stein* (1964) Lacan underlines her style as a 'practice of the letter', and he states that his own bearings remain entirely 'to the letter' drawn from the text, except where he pays homage to the writer.

Lacan refers to the workings of the unconscious and knowledge in regard to this novel, when he suggests that Marguerite Duras herself in 'her entire oeuvre … doesn't know where Lol has come from' (1965: 192) This 'not knowing' of Duras pertains to the way Lol V Stein does not emerge out of a certain obscurity: that is, Duras' practice of the letter maintains the place of an erasure or failure in knowledge. As might be expected, of course, this only articulates in a different way what Duras has to say about her writing experience. Writing, she says comes from the 'inner shadow', or from the 'black block' where the archives of the ego are: her books have to do with 'some region that has not been explored yet'; she wants to show the 'blank in the chain', the 'hole' (Duras 1993: 64). Thus in *The Ravishing of Lol V Stein* the end of desire that leads to madness occurs when one link comes undone.

Nonetheless, Lacan's emphasis on not pursuing knowledge beyond the work of art has implications for the status of truth in his work (and by extension of truth for the creative writer): truth is sustainable only as fiction and as obscured. It could be said that for him while the analysand discovers truths in the guise of fictions, the creative writer produces truths in the guise of fictions. In the light of some forms of psychoanalytic literary criticism which tend to exhaust the meaning of a text or its relation to its author's unconscious, this is quite refreshing. As psychoanalysts, philosophers, literary theorists and critics have reiterated over the past decades, psychoanalytic literary criticism should not uncover the meaning of texts, but only discover specific layers of meaning. Freud understood this well, actually: 'all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation' (Freud 1900: 368).

The title of one of Lacan's later papers on psychoanalysis and writing with psychoanalysis bordering on poetry, 'Liturarreter,' is a construction of a neologism, combined from *litura*- erasure, and *terre*- land, which affects a play of the letter. The practice of the letter is articulated here in terms of an
enactment of the 'erasure of no trace that is before' (Lacan 1971: 15), an idea Lacan finds already in evidence in avant-garde literature, the literature that 'does not sustain itself by the semblance; … that does not prove anything than the caesura' (1971: 18). Working with an author's psychobiography, for instance, would occlude, rather than elucidate, the elision produced by the letter, i.e., truth (1971: 4), the less of 'a less psycho biographic idea' resonates with a lack. The letter is evoked en souffrance, in the wings, in suffering, leaving a trace of the fundamental discordance between knowledge and being.

The import of Joyce's equivocation over the letter that becomes litter is drawn on briefly in 'Lituraterre' in relation to Lacan's affirmation of authors who are able to avow through their writing the consequence of language for the speaking being - the litter or waste that the author's being becomes. This resonates with what Duras has to say about her motivation for writing: 'I write to replace myself with the book,' she says in an interview with Michelle Porte, to 'relieve myself of my own importance. So that the book can take my place. To destroy myself, spoil, ruin myself in the book. To become vulgar, public, to lie down in the street' (Duras & Porte 1977: 102).

In his seminar from 1975, entitled Joyce the Sinthome, Lacan suggests a reading of the relationship between Joyce and his writing in which Joyce's style is called an art-language, or know-how with language. This is a further working of Lacan's earlier acknowledgement of Joyce as a founder of the effect, whereby 'language is perfected when it knows how to play with writing' (Lacan 1972-73: 36). The return to Joyce in this seminar marks a question for Lacan about the nature of creativity in his work. He argues that Joyce's writing, as it promotes language in its breaks and turns, is an artifice: a device which is able to at once undo and weave something from 'what is at first presented as a symptom' (1975-76: 10) In this context, Lacan writes the symptom anew by using the old French spelling, sinthome. It is a spelling that is effected by a certain violence done to language, i.e., a violence done to the French language through an injection of Greek into French. Lacan refers this Hellenisation of language to the effect in question in Joyce's own writing: that is, the twisting and turning of the English language that culminates in its destruction in Finnegans Wake (1939). This is a sustaining of a writing which names, a naming of what is impossible to speak, i.e., the real.

Teaching in the creative writing workshop: an other scene?

'Pierre Ménard, Author of the Quixote,' by Jorge Luis Borges (1964) is the story of a writer who painstakingly reproduces Cervantes' Don Quixote word for word and for whom the text thus reproduced constitutes a new work. By applying his signature to Cervantes' text, Ménard produces a new text. This story has the force of an apologue. Reproduced in another context, one same signifier has a different meaning. The same text thus becomes another text. This may be applied to the fact of teaching in a number of disciplines within the discourse of the university whereby knowledge amounts to the transmission of information.

Teaching creative writing is a different tale altogether. This is because
'information and imaginative writing are different forms of knowledge, demanding different skills and wholly different attitudes to language' (Alvarez 2005: 15).

Teaching psychoanalysis while putting to use the lessons of psychoanalysis in the creative writing workshop is yet another tale. Let us see why.

Whenever Lacan uses the term 'discourse' it is in order to stress the intersubjective nature of language, the fact that speech always implies another subject, an interlocutor. Thus the famous Lacanian axiom 'the unconscious is the discourse of the other', which first appears in 1953 and later becomes 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other', designates the unconscious as the effects on the subject of speech that is addressed to him or her from elsewhere, i.e., by another subject who may have been forgotten or by another psychic reality - an Other scene.

In 1969, however, Lacan uses the term discourse in a more specific way. From then on, 'discourse' designates 'a social bond, founded in language' (1972-73: 21). Indeed, in his seminar on The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (1969-70), Lacan identifies four discourses, i.e., four possible articulations of the symbolic network that regulates trans-individual relations. These four discourses are the discourse of the master, the discourse of the university, the discourse of the hysteric and the discourse of the analyst. The discourse of the master is the basic discourse from which all other discourses are derived: it is based on Hegel's dialectic of master and slave. The discourse of the master hinges on the following principle: 'The truth of the matter is I know what I'm talking about and therefore you should work for me.' Though Lacan's theory of the four discourses is beyond the scope of this paper, we shall retain from it that the discourse of the university in our corporate and bureaucratic times is terribly close to the discourse of the master, that the discourse of the hysteric is there to contest it, and that the discourse of the analyst may be useful to get inspiration from in creative writing workshops that draw on the techniques of psychoanalysis.

The principle of university teaching is predicated upon the following speech act: 'the truth of the matter is I know what I'm talking about', which is established by the rule of repression, a rule one is allowed to transgress temporarily in research papers that critique or contest pre-established 'truths' (in such instances the researcher is temporarily in the position of the hysteric who contests the master's discourse). In order to say 'I know what I'm talking about' I also assume that I have mastered my jouissance as well as the jouissance of the other. This means that as a university teacher I am never uncomfortable with what is being said in my class. The object I offer my students is immaterial. The relation I entertain with these students is cool, devoid of any transference - questions of bullying or sexual harassment have been erased from my lexicon …

Teaching in psychoanalysis is diametrically opposed to university teaching. Lacan said that he taught in the position of the analysand, i.e., from a discourse deployed from the point of view of the subject-who-is-not-supposed-to-know. This means that the teacher is here confronted with his own 'I do not know what I am saying'. And further, this means that the teacher recognizes that he does not master jouissance, especially the jouissance of mastering meaning. It is a teaching that resists
Teaching creative writing while putting to use the lessons of psychoanalysis in the creative writing workshop implies an interplay of discourses, by which I mean that the teacher's position varies in the course of each session. During the lectures, one might say that the teacher occupies both the positions of subject-supposed-to-know, or repository of knowledge, acting thus in accordance with the discourse of the university. During the workshops, however, the position of the teacher alternates between subject-supposed-to-know and subject-not-supposed-to-know. The subject-supposed-to-know initiates the work and the desire to go beyond oneself while the subject-supposed-not-to know encourages the process of going beyond oneself. The subject-supposed-to know also occasionally steps in with her police cap on when the transference gets out of hand.

Before speaking of the transference, however, I'd like to discuss the framework established in the workshops to make a certain kind of writing possible, i.e., a kind of writing that pushes its own stylistic and thematic boundaries through a practice of the letter. Needless to say, this type of writing practice is radically opposed to the 'Simon says' approach to workshops we are familiar with in genre writing classes.

With MA students, the writing environment is usually safer than with undergraduates. We are speaking of students (often published writers) who have developed strategies to overcome the anxiety that comes from not writing, or from writing, for that matter. Though it is crucial to expect the unexpected and be prepared to deal with it, one does take risks. The workshop is structured like an extended seminar on applied poetics with creative responses to theory and imaginative writing to ease ourselves into the topic set for the week. Then, depending on the size of the class there is a lecture or a class presentation followed by a discussion. Next is a writing session based on psychoanalytic concepts or situations gleaned from the readings for the day that are deemed worthy of exploitation. Though the protocols or emphases might vary from class to class, there are rules that need to be abided by: taking part in a free association round table; respect the 'write without thinking and as fast as you can' injunction, the 'do not speak before time is up' rule and the 'please leave the room if uncomfortable' invitation. The hardest rules are sometimes the simplest ones: let your thoughts float when stimulated by your senses (we use visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and even gustatory stimuli). I have often joked that what we might all need was a class in relaxation, which is not as absurd as it sounds, anxiety being the crippling affect par excellence (Hecq 2005).

The writing aimed at in these workshops proceeds from the interaction of what is unknown and what will be revealed. It is a writing that produces raw imaginary material (Lacan) or semiotic writing (Kristeva) that can later be processed and harnessed in the trammels of the symbolic, should the author wish to. And most do, for they wish to be published - a wise wish if Borges is to be believed: 'we have to publish what we write because if we don't, we keep changing it, trying all the possible variations, and we don't go beyond that' (Borges 1994: 67).

In a sense, the workshop I am speaking about, and which I call 'an Other Scene?' is not that far from an attempt at creating what Artaud (1967) has...
called in a different context: a scene, a physical place that asks to be filled and to speak its own concrete language. Artaud is referring to everything that can be said independently of words, a kind of poetry that appeals to the senses. He criticizes the notion of an art that aims only at delighting us in our spare time for, as he says, life is not on one side, art on the other. Similarly, in his preface to Grotowski's *Towards a poor theatre*, Peter Brook (1968) warns artists to keep on renewing themselves so as not to become rigid.

The process of putting oneself in question in relation to the other is the context of the work of analysis. The process of putting oneself in question in relation to the Other, however, is the context of the creative writing workshop. The difference must not be lost sight of, for it would be dangerous and mistaken to encourage intersubjective identifications in a workshop environment. Therefore, students are invited, but never expected, to read what they have just written; comments are only minimal, and emotive adjustments to peer feedback discouraged.

The adventure that unfolds in the creative writing workshop is not an analytic adventure. But the way in which each of the participants is engaged in an intersubjective relation, the effects of a dialectical reworking, are far from negligible. This is why I think that an examination of the notion of transference is a prerequisite to pedagogical practice in the creative writing workshop. Transference can be understood in both a narrow and broad way, so let us see how these may be useful to us.

The term 'transference' first appeared in Freud's work with reference to the displacement of affect from one idea to another (1900: 562). Later on, it came to refer to the patient's (love/hate) relationship with the analyst as it develops in the course of the treatment. This soon became the central meaning of the term, and is the sense in which it is usually understood in psychoanalytic circles today, though it must be said that there are many different and opposing views of transference. Lacan, for instance, argues that although transference often manifests itself in the guise of strong affects such as love and hate, it does not consist of emotions as such, but of the structure of an intersubjective relationship (Lacan 1951).

More importantly for pedagogy, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan articulates the concept of transference with his concept of the Subject Supposed to Know, sometimes alternatively translated as Supposed Subject of Knowledge. According to this view, transference is the attribution of knowledge to the Other, the supposition that the Other is a subject who knows: 'As soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists somewhere … there is transference' (Lacan 1965-66: 232). For Lacan, however, this subject who is supposed to know need not be a physical person. This subject may indeed be a body of work, i.e., a text. This implies that transference can manifest itself with reference to three instances of the subject supposed to know in the creative workshop: the teacher, the work and the peer group.

Although one might say that the existence of the transference is a necessary condition of writing in the workshop, it is not sufficient in itself. It is, as we all know, necessary that teachers deal with the transference in specific ways by using particular protocols and strategies, for instance. Moreover, because transference can be both 'positive' and negative, it is well worth reflecting on
its avatars case by case (transference is positive when it develops trust and generates work; it is negative when it produces anxiety, resistance or aggressivity). In my experience of creative writing workshops, anxiety is the most volatile affect of all, even at postgraduate level.

By way of conclusion

Despite never requesting an analysis, Joyce knew about psychoanalysis. In fact, he derided both Jung and Freud:

> Be who farther potential? And so wider but we grisly old
> Skylos who have done our unsmiling bit on alices, when they were yung and easily freudened, in the penumbra of the procuring room and what oracular comepression we had applied to them. (1939: 115)

Freud, however, did not apply standards, techniques, or protocols, but worked (and sometimes forged) some place of truth for each subject: a truth that slips and slides in language. Lacan would extend this space to what he called *ilanguage* (a language which is unique to each individual speaking being) in his later teaching. This is to suggest that in this working of each individual, psychoanalysis holds a relationship with creative writing as an art of the particular, as a practice of the letter, even when subjected to the discourse of the university.

To some extent, psychoanalysis elucidates the nature of writing and of the creative process for each of us, one by one. It also enriches our understanding of writing as knowledge. Finally it enables us to conceptualize and implement innovative pedagogical practices.

At the risk of sounding flippant, I shall leave the last word - which can only be written words - to the creative artist whose knowledge and truth emerge through the defiles of fictions: 'but I was sure he had something on with that one it takes me to find out a thing like that he said you have no proof it was her proof O yes …’ (Joyce 1922: 609).

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