

Critical Searches for Style in the Literature of Boredom: A Discussion on the Implications of its Inconsistent Genre Markers and Ethos

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Abstract

A noticeable trend in university classes is studying boredom in literature, a theme which ostensibly began to envelope the western canon from the 19th century onwards that centers on the artistic utilization of dilatory space. Critical theorists like Adorno call it *free time* and warn of capitalism's propensity to subvert it. Whereas boredom has traditionally been a boon for humanity in its propensity to force contemplation that leads to creativity, in modernity it has been succumbed to *en masse* and therefore no longer plays its role of detecting the human threshold preceding anger. Critical analyses have prompted many to search for a particular style of boredom, a pursuit of its quiddity in order to crack its style, which in a milieu where method and style is everything equates to numerous staid attempts. While genre identifying stylistic markers perhaps do exist in the generic sense that the plays and novels included in this proposed corpus are typically about white, privileged, and post-lapsarian moderns dealing with vertiginous existential issues, positing an exact style remains intractable. This paper, while not an exhaustive examination of the texts, posits nevertheless that purported stylistic markers are not consistent or discernable. What is more plausible, rather, is that dispossession affects productions and critical readings. Humans all seek meaning and as it was traditionally signified in cosmologies that no longer provide import in the cultural zeitgeist of western productions about the mundane, the loss of immanence has desultorily impacted artistic expression and the ethos of the poet.

Keywords: Adorno, boredom as genre, critical theory, free time, literature, meaning, shamelessness, style of boredom

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Introduction

That the existence of boredom has traditionally been a boon for humanity is a foregone conclusion. The void forces contemplation, which in turn yields creativity, a reality true before Nietzsche articulates it as the “windless calm” needed to self propel (Spacks, 1996, p. 2). This unequivocal declarative statement allows moving swiftly to addressing whether art created in the state of boredom has a particular quiddity, style, pattern or some essential aspect that is extrinsically and cognitively identifiable. It is posited here that this would necessitate affirming cognitive faculties as reliable along with traditional assumptions like *a priori* intuition and abduction. Such foundational epistemological certitude is a requisite tool in equipping any reader of texts. Remarkably, however, this issue of studying the banal and the angst it causes as reflected in modern literary productions is principally taken up by theorists that identify as *critical*, that is, in contrast to *traditional*. Essentially they as observers of external phenomena endeavor to be simultaneously explanatory, practical and normative in their moral claims in a manner articulated by Horkheimer and others in the Frankfurt tradition intent on liberating humans from all forms of enslavement as they understand it (Bohman, 2016). In short, they attempt to criticize what is wrong, explain how to change it and provide achievable goals by which to do so that rely on select integrated social sciences – *select* being the operative term – as reductionist epistemology has certain implications. As interlocutors shaped by preceding debates, this trajectory of thought targeting all ideology as pernicious rests largely on the materialist assumptions of Marxism, therefore, these ostensibly universalist and positivist ambitions inherit some Kantian transcendental notions of goal formulation. However, in this naturalistic closed system’s expressed intent of assessing society in its historical specificity, it truncates the domain of knowledge with jejune antipathy whereby an ethic of suspicion presumes all manifestations of power as being surreptitious. As it is known in cognitive science, framing is key and if power is on the mind one is likely to see power everywhere in the close reading of texts (Lakoff, 2004). In nominating practicality over instrumentality the critical treatment of literary texts as self-referential objects correspondingly inherits Romanticism’s acceptance and appreciation of individual emotion and aesthetics, although in its postmodern context the crisis of meaning and representation disallows any objective claims of stable phenomena. What results is that the everyday modern feels dispossessed. In such a state, the trivial becomes central. Leisure no longer exists as license, but rather as a cause of existential angst. Despite detractors such as Derrida (1980) who criticizes genre as a concept, the traditional judgement of taste somehow survives intact in that genre remains subjectively identifiable as social consensus. Yet exactly just how boredom and the everyday feelings of suffering constitute a genre is not hitherto entirely understood, although there are some broad-spectrum stylistic markers such as: an emphasis on the mundane and boredom born out of a deprived desire or a promise not kept, which is typically found among privileged, white, post-lapsarian moderns in existential crisis. These markers are not, however, consistent and one example of how the scope of this phenomenon can be decentered from a Eurocentric emphasis is the work of Majumdar (2015) who studies boredom in literature as a colonial and post-colonial psychological effect that has gone global.

Methodology: Searching for a Style of Boredom as Good Pedagogy

As it generally pertains to literary criticism, the contemporary emphasis on method translates into a solemn attempt at cracking the style of genre under the auspices that style is everything. Therefore, positing productions born out of the submissiveness of waiting as either

aesthetically beautiful or unpleasant is a conceivable operation. Adorno identifies the crux of society's problems as cultural and psychological, he is also very concerned about leaving problems unaddressed that may develop into fascism, and he is ensconced in indignation to all forces of production that manufacture what he believes are false desires primarily attributed to capitalism. The telos that should be pursued, as Adorno and Horkheimer both would have it, is to satisfy the true needs and desires of human beings (Bohman, 2016). Based on what Adorno (1991) articulates as "free time" and the utilization of dilatory space, the courses studying this loose corpus of boredom in literature generally theorize about proposing a coherent stylistic similitude in productions emergent from the submissiveness of waiting. The list enumerated herein is not exhaustive, but works that feature in these course syllabi comprise 20th century plays like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) by Edward Albee and *Betrayal* (1978) by Harold Pinter that allow considering boredom as not only a type of writing, but also as perhaps a type of reading, playing and acting. Works of theory like Huizinga's (1971) *Nature and the Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon* and the psychoanalysis of Freud often supplement classroom discussions on theory. Novel selections include works like *Waiting for Godot* (1954) by Samuel Beckett as well as *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James, written on the cusp of the age of modernism and which fosters discussions on narrator reliability. Additionally included are a range of novels by authors such as John Fowles, Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, and David Foster Wallace. Questions of value are certainly not limited to constraints of chronology or geography. For instance, Spacks (1996) includes in the discussion of how boredom as discontent both haunts and motivates the literary imagination in some 18th and 19th century works from Samuel Johnson and Jane Austen. Others include Dostoyevsky and Bellow. And while it is a good analytical and pedagogical exercise in close reading for students to search for and attempt to identify a particular style of boredom in literature, it likely does not exist. Perhaps it does, but it is posited here that as humans we simply cannot tolerate "living in a world without meaning" (Smith, 2014), and thus, it is more plausible that recognizable similitudes exist within the confines of this literary corpus on boredom that have inconsistent stylistic markers generally related to the vertiginous attenuation of meaning. However, this does not mean that boredom has a style, and as a brief survey of some of the literature will reveal, positing a style within a denoted genre remains intractable.

Situating Human Reactions to Boredom

Because boredom is a state, like anger or sadness it can be responded to in a variety of ways: suppressed and fought, or embraced. These are common reactions. Pascal (1670) famously says that "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone". Modern people detest time alone spent towards inter-directedness and in one recent study people preferred receiving mild electric shocks over spending six to 15 minutes alone in a room thinking (Wilson, et al., 2014). Toohey (2011) demarcates a separation between simple boredom and existential boredom, the idea being that the prior results from repetitive tasks whereas the latter stems from pondering questions of existence and purpose; however, Toohey argues that the prior is actually the essence of the emotional state of boredom stripped from intellectualizing and that its biological role within the insula is to detect the human threshold, that boredom is likely to be followed up by the state of anger (*ira*). This insight is valuable. That a correlation may exist between dopamine levels and boredom potentially impacts a search for style because a society succumbing to boredom en masse appears to be a knotty harbinger for boredom's seizing prevalence in art and permeated ambivalence towards life. It also dangerously leads to war. When

the human self safeguards against the ostensible dangers of mysteries, it is a cognition that initially yields upshots such as increased rationality and a sense of “invulnerability” (Taylor, 2007, p. 309). And there is a contentious debate about the correlation between unbelief and higher intelligence quotients; Lynn et al (2009), for instance, track the numerous social benefits that come with discarding religious belief across 137 countries. However, Taylor points out that despite certain upshots modernity’s cultural eclipse of the transcendent leaves attempts at solemnizing important moments of life ringing with a “felt flatness” that occurs as part of what he calls the “malaise of immanence” (Taylor, 2007, p. 307). Furthermore, researchers of morbidity have established, and continue to find more material benefits of belief and practice that generally lead to prosperous health outcomes by, for instance, increasing life expectancy up to seven years (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999), and preventing against diseases and depression (Rogers, Hummer, & Nam, 2000).

Humans simply desire meaningful rituals and this is hard to grapple with sans meta-cosmology, although skeptics like David Hume would disagree, art *ought to* be informed by some wider system of meaning. That modernity’s destination is unimaginable is vertiginous. Thus dissident reactions to the agonistic progress of its mainstream principles come in all sorts, from those of a class war disposition, to those of fascist and or Christian dispositions, all of whom tend to be stratified together as radical traditionalists against progress who refuse to ride the tiger of modernity (Evola, 2003). These are all reactions to the loss of an immanent order. But what can we make of this period of succumbing to boredom when readers of history argue that the propensity for human civilizations is to thrive and create beauty? The most beautiful thing humans possess is language and of it the most beautiful is poetry, in either accent or time. Robert Frost states that the first discipline is the acquisition of words, one’s vocabulary (Harris, 1961). Traditionally, we as humans used to learn orally from our mothers’ tongues how to listen, then how to read, then in grammar school how to establish a sincere command of language. This traditional language acquisition process has been supplanted by a techno-visual learning culture, learning by interpreting images instead of signs, the exercise of semiotic interpretation that reading and writing comprise, each respectively different acts of creation (Yusuf, 2002). Art means different things to different people. For some it is creation, yet for others it is skill. Classically it is mimesis or what Caillois calls *ludus*, a “makeshift device intended to allay boredom” and a primitive desire to seek out diversion, which is one of his four categories of play in a landscape that includes vertigo, something he argues is unavoidable in the process of rebirth (Caillois, 1961, p. 31). Perhaps interdiction and justification stylistically mark a confessional aspect of the corpus as the stories often begin with misconduct of some sort that needs amending. The impulse seems primordial.

Relating Boredom to Ethos

Defining art with a stable term remains a point of departure. We know however that the fibers beneath the cerebral cortex in the corpus callosum are smaller in children that watch a lot of television. Nowadays that is nearly everyone except progenies of the vigilant, kids being raised on images instead of orality with stunted creativity. If as Spacks (1996) claims, a shift started in 19th century Europe that made all writing about boredom, it would behoove further examination because it means something for civilization; there is no civilization without the poet, Ezra Pound calls the artist the antennae of the race, a conduit able to foresee cultural conditions (Colosi, 2002). In connection, Huizinga (1971, p. 26) says play is ritual, sacred and “the highest attainable

expression of that which escapes logical understanding” and although he does not commit to a definition of play he argues that humans understand via contrast. Averroes could not picture the Greek play because it did not exist in his Andalusian milieu and Borges (1949) points out that it was then perhaps absurd to give commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* as literature detached from its performance stardust. Yet, despite this Averroes was still one of its paramount all time interlocutors dubbed “The Commentator” because play as ritual could be inferentially conceptualized through contrast, a *via negativa* of sorts, from within the established rubric for meaning of his civilizational perspective.

If poets are prophets then it may be necessary to use theological terms. Alexander Pope writes of vice that “We first endure, then pity, then embrace” (Pope, 1733). Enlightenment polemicists like Voltaire satirize such promotion of a public ethos. But maybe that’s the difference between a pamphleteer and a poet. We cannot have an Aristotle or a Plato without a Homer. The poet is foundational and civilizations are nothing other than the character that embodies them, so when the ethos becomes bereft of that principled character, it becomes hollow. We do not need a Straussian neoconservative melodramatic division between white hats and black hats on *Gunsmoke* to know the good guys when we have a poet who imparts with nuance (Yusuf, 2002).

Proposed Stylistic Markers of the Literature of Boredom

When the poet is not held to an ethos of virtue we get productions like Nabakov’s *Lolita*, a pornographic novel about a man repetitively defiling a nymphet. That it is lauded for verbal playfulness as art-as-experience (and pretenses of making a safer world) is indicative of profound shamelessness that cannot fairly be contrasted with guilt cultures because cultural anthropology has perhaps not fully expounded the extent of this poetic descent. The novel begins and ends with the same lulling, “Lo. Lee. Ta.” More than just part of the novel’s symmetry, it is perhaps an incantation connected to the onomatopoeia of lull (and *lullen* in early modern Dutch), which the *Oxford English Dictionary* etymologically links to prattling, sleep inducement, and “to quiet by deception” with uses in English dating back to as early as 14th century Chaucer (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2017). Nabakov’s championing of individualism and arguments about the limits of human liberty are acknowledged. As Adorno and others claim, capitalism does not sell us what we really need. People should by now feel thoroughly entertained, yet they are still bored. Consequently, Nabakov’s narrator Humbert brazenly engages in a dialectics of desire with the reader about his hamartia. It can be argued that this is an untrue desire manufactured by capitalist industry in place of masked true desires. However, at the point that his “soul is hanging around” with guilt that makes him want to “repent” he is overcome again with lust, and he succumbs to it rather than experiencing *peripeteia* (Nabokov, 2000, p. 93). So we are left with only the explanatory, without the practical and normative guidelines for teleological aspiration. Again we have the stylistic markers of a white, educated and privileged man who is not fulfilled. But if man is indeed *Homo Religiosus* then the reoccurring style markers of interdiction, confession and repentance generally speak to a yearning for a lost stabilizing process of meaning. The play and salaciousness make readers feel dirty and studies reveal that conceptualizing immoral acts cause a yearning for ritual cleansing of celestial waters to wash away terrestrial sins and a desire to do good deeds. Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth frantically seeks to remove imaginary blood off her hands after complicity in King Duncan’s murder, known as the Macbeth effect, which alludes to a deeply rooted primordial human morality. Similarly, in a soiled state respondents are likelier to fill

in W __ H as “WASH” and therefore if a student reading Nabakov feels compelled to head to the washroom, it is likely to be sensed and replicated by others in a classroom (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006).

The uses of dilatory space in productions emerging amidst the loss of sanctity have general markers. Ironically, when it became acceptable practice for actors to liberally take the verities of scripts with “the author’s intention uncluttered” to freely make authoritative adaptations placing interpretation “on a level with creation,” playwright Edward Albee thought it absurd (Albee, 2017, p. 2). Actors’ interpretive transgressions are in many cases just obstructions between the reader and writer. The assumptions Albee makes, however, need exploration much further than what can be addressed here, but in Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* we see a shameless couple invite a younger couple over late and night in order to ostensibly share in their commiseration and pettiness. It is an induction of sorts that prompts the young couple to see their future selves in the miserable couple, which prompts the young woman (Honey) to vomit. The characters are well to do, post-lapsarian moderns, sadistic, bored and miserable. But from their sardonic and passionless episodes full of ire it is nay impossible to detect any redeeming qualities in Albee’s characters. What do they want from us? It seems they want us to join them in commiseration, but it is not entirely clear.

The state of unclear disillusionment is monopolized and quantified. Adorno (1991) blames capitalism’s division of labor and its compulsion to work for boredom as function and he argues that consumers are producers of the things they consume, that leisure time is really just an appendage of work. The precursor to his “free time” is *leisure*, related with *license* and connotes privilege, another stylistic marker found in literature about boredom in that the characters mostly commiserate from positions of privilege. So, what Barthes (1989) calls the dialectics of desire compels writers to produce the content demanded by consumers. Wallace (1996) satirizes the leisure industry in *Shipping Out* which is a narration about a privileged passenger on a Caribbean cruise who is bored. The ship’s name is the Zenith, “which no wag could resist immediately rechristening the m.v. Nadir” and amidst childlike passengers there to be pampered the only stable individual is Petra (the rock of stability), the maid the narrator is enamored with (Wallace, 1996, p. 2). Freud argues that mental events are regulated by the pleasure principle and quantifies pleasure and unpleasure to “the quantity of excitation in a given period of time” (1990, p. 4). But beyond explanations reliant on the carnal impulse, our subjective experience of time is elongated and our well-being is enhanced by witnessing the sublime because awe has a “capacity to adjust time perception” (Melanie Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, the converse can also ring true; for instance, during the middle of a stream of consciousness monologue on the mundane in Woolf’s *The Mark on the Wall* she exclaims “Oh dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity!” before mentioning the “rapidity of life” that seems “haphazard” (Woolf, 1917, p. 2). The manipulation of time and space resulting in vertigo is something reoccurring in the corpus of boredom, a stylistic marker perhaps, but not tractably consistent.

Because it is important here to restate inconsistencies in the epistemic space used to identify consistent markers. A trend exists among contemporary literary scholars that discounts historicizing and sociologizing authors by connecting the importance of events in their personal

lives to their emotional and psychological states, the very creative juices that guide ideas in novels. So the trend of depression commonly found among literary authors would have ostensibly little to no bearing on close reading a text. Is the unfortunate fact that Virginia Woolf jumped into a river to end her own life, or that Ernest Hemingway chose a gun to bring about his own end extraneous to the delimitation of scope on a search for style? It has been said that writing is a form of schizophrenia, and a team of Swedish researchers find that writers and those in creative careers are twice as likely to commit suicide (Kyaga, Landén, Boman, Hultman, & Niklas Långström, 2013). Angst is a constant part of life and this pattern fits in to the stylistic markers being discussed. Wallace epitomizes the brilliant, privileged, yet depressed writer coterie of the corpus, a person who suffered from addictions and was interested in the religious impulse (Zahl, 2012), but one who felt he had to repress it because the culture was “all wrong for it”. He points out a pattern to an interviewer:

You know, why are *we* – and by ‘we’ I mean people like you and me: mostly white, upper middle class or upper class, *obscenely* well educated, doing really interesting jobs, sitting in really expensive chairs, watching the *best*, you know, watching the most sophisticated electronic equipment money can buy – why do we feel so empty and unhappy? (Zahl, 2010, p. 1).

If we accept the narrations from Aristotle, monetizing production and capitalizing on disillusionment starts way before the 1800s with Greek poets like Simonides being commissioned to write poems for remuneration. Poets for hire do not just write jingles in advertising. In Bellow’s (1975) *Humboldt’s Gift* the hopeless poet Fleisher dies trying to raise consciousness through art, whereas Charlie Citrine, his understudy of many years, cashes in on writing plays based on Fleisher he does not truly believe in. The story is a *Roman a clef* about possibly the most popular writer of the latter half of the 20th century. So what does that tell us? Consequently, the reoccurrence of particular sins may infer something about social psychology. One is envy, something societies display towards people of intellect. Kierkegaard argues about envy (*Misundelse*) that people will readily admit to a felonious crime before they admit to being envious (Elrod, 2014). Toynbee (1934) opines that civilizations fail when the creative minorities deteriorate and a homogenization occurs that degenerates into society run by the mediocre and provincial, which he calls the dominant minority. Another reoccurrence is *ira*. Aggressive anger is a common reaction to shame. In Dostoyevsky’s (1880) *Brothers Karamazov* Zosima interprets Fedor Pavlovich’s shamelessness as originating in shame itself. Similarly, the dietician in Faulkner’s *The Light in August* (1932) caught sleeping with the doctor acts out against the child who accidentally walks in on her debauchery because the memory of shame leads to more shame, aggression and then shamelessness.

Stylistic Markers Seem to Endorse a Reevaluation of Ethos

From the brief examination thus far shamelessness stands out as a stylistic cultural feature in the literature of boredom. Under its aegis there is a lot of meaningless drivel being written and read, produced and consumed. It is indicative of an ethos in precipitous decay Spacks calls “a new version of the doom assigned to humankind in the original fall from grace” (1996, p. 2). Her statement assumes another stylistic marker in a distinctly post-Christian secularity that has not fully shed its widely held espousal of humankind as a fallen and dark creature in need of

redemption, an undesirable view not shared by other cosmologies and religious traditions. Zen, for instance, transforms art with an ontological hierarchy that posits equality among creatures, so in its haiku, music and painting one witnesses simplicity, sorrow and delicacy imbued by naturalism requiring a search for truth (*satori*) from a “non-positional” noetic attitude prior to expression (Kasulis, 1981, p. 73). The artist’s metamorphosis in becoming aware of essences is a trial, and Eugene Herrigal remarks that it took five arduous years of studying Zen archery before he was acquainted with the *it* factor (Herrigal, 1953). While it is uncomfortable to engage in inward-directed thought, it underlines the loneliness of existence that moderns do not want to dwell on. Additionally, The Prophet of Islam says that “God has proscribed doing the beautiful in all things” and this all-embracing attempt at the restoration of beauty in the human world (*ihsaan*) is followed up with a directive, “when one of you slaughters an animal, let him do so well and beautifully,” meaning that even the mundane or the arduous everyday tasks need to be imbued with beauty (al-Qushayri, p. 379). If one can complete the disagreeable necessities of life in a way that evinces beauty by his or her doing things well, as a heuristic this can be applicable to illuminating a manuscript, carving a mosaic, or designing the Taj Mahal (Winters, 2017). And when a person looks at the artistry he or she draws on socially nurtured mores of criteria that are ultimately overridden by the emotional brain (field A1 of the medial orbito-frontal cortex) as it correlates parametrically to beauty, ugliness and indifference; as researchers in the field of neuroesthetics put it “The beauty of mathematical formulations lies in abstracting, in simple equations, truths that have universal validity” (Zaky, Romaya, & Dionigi Benincasa, 2014, p. 1). Van Doren (1943) uses the anecdotal legend of the citizen who wakes up at forty doubting everything and who cannot find value, meaning, or a theme to his everyday routine. Van Doren posits that “The reason could be that he had missed the heart of the human doctrine, which deals with repetition, routine and refrain. Life is monotonous”. Van Doren says the heathen of forty is indicative of an ethos suffering from a citizenry lacking in classical education, “When the liberal arts fail to do their work, civilization has become a disease. When they are dismissed as a luxury practical affairs suffer the consequence” (Van Doren, 1943, p. 73). Opining for a classical liberal arts education for all is actually an argument for equipping a citizenry with the tools of proper allocation, so that in confronting specific facts, truths and paradigms the proper response can be allocated.

Conclusion

To properly analyze implications of such magnitude requires a widening of scope beyond that of this paper. Just as the laws of gravitational physics do not coalesce with those of quantum mechanics, the tools of criterion for moral judgment are typically non-transferable between civilizations despite the west’s recent attempts at establishing a genealogy of the secular that posits its set of human rights as universal. Nevertheless it can be said in regards to literature on boredom that the search for a style must be limited to a specific milieu, a *zeitgeist* distressed in its belief that context is boundless and thereby can never provide satisfactory determinations of meaning. In maintaining hope fleetingly that the work of deconstructionists has a destination, the void caused by waiting for such an unlikely discovery has perceivable implications for the optimists. Ultimately, a civilization’s art is underpinned by its beliefs and thus civilizations are judged by criteria that do not exclude the arts. Contemporarily some in the academy find it problematic to submit art to an all encompassing ecology, but this phase may be ephemeral as neuroesthetics and other sciences are only forcing a recollection of something that is primordial, that beauty is not merely in the eye of the beholder, but is rather also something objectively scalable. The same

cannot be said about contemporary academic evaluation except that despite claims of value neutrality it is a near certainty that in a century most of its en vogue inclinations will have been replaced by other preferences. That the stylistic markers of the corpus on boredom often consist of ugliness, unhappiness and inescapable vertigo is indication of a wider cultural decline. Goethe faced a similar problem when trying to establish the field of world literature by indexing all aesthetic qualities under a Hellenistic rubric that failed in properly identifying the beauty of art from other cosmologies (Botz-Bornstein, 2006). Some things simply do not import. Lines, for instance, can stand on their own as forms in addition to being parts of something more complex, something greater. The brain processes visual stimuli and retains essential properties, and to see beauty nourishes the soul, which has measurable physiological consequences. Therefore, to see its obverse manifest in writing would be similarly detectable in that art nowadays is in the process of trying to reestablish meaning in an era of technological advancements amidst declining language and imagination. So, it may be too early to make a determination on style except to say that the style markers are indicative of wider issues.

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