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A Mysterious Paralysis and Miraculous Recovery:

The Dynamic Shift in Critical Evaluation of Barth's *The End of The Road*

John Barth's *The End of The Road* is a multifaceted novel, which tells the account of the young English professor, Jacob Horner, and his struggle to overcome his plague of "cosmopsis," or paralysis of the will. The condition results in his inability to act, or at least to act in a meaningful and committed way. This undoubtedly stems from his undefined identity and purpose as well as his fear of emotional involvement. The symptomatic climax of his malady occurs on his 28th birthday when he irrationally abandons his M.A. program and decides to relocate to a new city. Unable to act, he finds himself sitting immobilized on a bench at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station with an expressionless gaze. He recounts, "There was no reason to do anything" (Barth, 323) He is only able to return from this transfixed state when a doctor, whose specialty is paralysis, orders Jake to come into his office for therapy. Jake hesitantly consents and begins a loyal relationship with the doctor, simply because it removes his burden of indecisiveness as he follows the doctor's every command. He appears to have no foundational beliefs, but will passionately argue a point for the sake of opposition, defending that anything is ultimately unjustifiable. He can be both blunt and evasive, and maintains an array of contradictory feeling about almost everyone and everything. He insists that he is "just not that interested in laying women" (345), but impulsively engages in sexual encounters, if for no other reason than to affirm his animalistic essence. He is a self-proclaimed manic-depressive, but his

rapidly changing moods are ostensibly governed by the weather outside and by the bust of Laocoön sitting on his mantelpiece, which he describes as his barometer – informing him of "the weight of day" (273). He further describes himself as an "owl, peacock, chameleon, donkey and popinjay fugitive from a medieval bestiary" (368), emphasizing his kaleidoscopic personality and behavioral traits. His erratic nature and turbulent temperament are analogous to the volatile nature of the narrative. What begins as a somewhat light and comical anecdote unwinds into a dark and violent story. Similarly, there has been inconsistency within the reception of the novel itself, and critics have offered a range of opinions on both its interpretation and significance. It has been described as everything from a "novel of ideas," addressing fundamental questions of philosophy, to an ideological parody, burlesquing the most ordinary of human activities. Furthermore, there is a disparity of interest in the novel from its time of publication and the original reviews (which are virtually nonexistent), to the vast amounts of recognition and discourse it received in subsequent decades. Its relatively uneventful early shelf life could be described as a sort of paralysis comparable to that of Jake Horner. In sum, *The End of the Road* is a vitally important component of Barth's canon. However, its complex and fresh ideas preceded a social context in which they could be fully appreciated, and thus it would require time for the novel to come into the success it deserves.

On July 21, 1958, just four days after *The End of the Road* was published, a single review featured in *Time* magazine highlighted the work. It modestly describes the novel as a "highly diverting book," and accurately refers to Jake as "one of the most fascinatingly dreadful characters to appear in a long time" ("Books: A Study in Nihilism," 1). The column notes that Barth is unique among English professors because "he likes words well enough to play with them after school," and also that he is "a very funny (but notably unfrivolous) writer" (3). It

concludes with equivocal praise, contending, "Barth is clearly one of the more interesting of younger U.S. writers and he has produced that rarity of U.S. letters – a true novel of ideas" (3). It is astounding that others did not accompany this flattering review. Furthermore, Barth was not an entirely unknown author at this time – this was his second novel, closely following *The Floating Opera* published less than two years earlier. Additionally, *The Floating Opera* received a great deal more attention, as it was reviewed in several publications, though they were not altogether favorable. One such review appeared in the *New York Times*, in which the critic begins with a seemingly complementary portrayal of Barth as "young, erudite and clever" noting, "his ability to contrive a really preposterous situation is impressive," but abruptly shifts to a more critical tone asserting that the novel's "faults outweigh [its] humor" (Prescott, 11). The novel as a whole is referred to as "dull," and its humor as "labored and flat" (11). He sneeringly remarks "Some of its heavy-handed attempts to shock seem cheap in a juvenile and nasty way rather than sophisticated or realistic, as they were probably intended," indirectly attacking Barth's stylistic choices (11). He also criticizes the book for being a "frenzied farce," reasoning that Barth develops the philosophical of the narrative too extensively to expect to not be taken seriously; however, this point seems to be a little exaggerated and misses the underlying parody of the novel entirely, which he dismisses as being an odd amalgamation of incompatible styles (11). He even suggests that it is as if two mismatched authors decided to collaborate on the novel – "One author writes crude farce occasionally brightened by wit. The other broods on the meaning of existence with solemn goodwill. The result is odd indeed" (11). Despite such instances of hostility, most other reviews were positive, such as the one appearing in *The Los Angeles Times*, which describes the novel as being "rollicking" but with "equal[ly] serious intent" (Merlin, D8). Additionally, the novel experienced success in bookstores overall, spent time on best-sellers lists,

and was even the runner-up for the 1957 National Book Award in fiction – none of which are achievements shared by *The End of The Road*.

Adding to the peculiar discrepancy in these two novels' popularity are the abundant similarities of their content. Interestingly, he wrote both of the books in the same year, although *The End of the Road* was not published until two years after its predecessor. Even Barth confirms their resemblance saying, "My books tend to come in pairs" (Harris, 49). Of foremost importance is the likeness of the protagonists, Jake and Todd, with their shared nihilistic tendency. Both characters experience a sort of meaninglessness and have difficulty taking reality seriously. They both defend that nothing has intrinsic value, and that values are only relative and have no absolutes, though Jake readily argues this with others while Todd more frequently dwells on these ideas in contemplation. Their solutions to their respective nihilistic dilemmas also differ. Jakes believes that if nothing makes a difference than there is no reason to do anything, as he displays in his severe state of inaction. Alternatively, Todd believes "If nothing makes any final difference, that fact makes no final difference either, and there is no more reason to commit suicide, say, than not to, in the last analysis" (Barth, 227). Jake's mere inconsistency may be what keeps him from sharing Todd's suicidal thoughts, as he says, "Only the profundity and limited duration of my moods kept me from being a suicide" (282), reasoning that he can not stay fixed in a particular mood long enough to act on it. According to Richard W. Noland, Jake is a "successor to Todd… a portrait of Todd Andrews with a complete paralysis of will" (18). He continues this illuminating comparison and says, "Todd is not completely paralyzed. But neither is he the man of reason he thinks he is… To Barth, he is a man in whom reason and emotion run in separate directions. Without emotion, reason can give him no purpose for living. It cannot establish permanent value or affirm life. It can only determine that there are no absolutes" (17).

Another similarity between the characters is that they each suffer from illness – heart disease in Todd's case and paralysis in Jake's. In addition, they each suffer from deeper psychological issues. Todd is haunted by traumatic events in his past and Jake is afflicted with irreconcilable waves of emotion. They both seek out similar methods to manage their problems also. Todd assumes a series of masks "to hide my heart from my mind, and my mind from my heart" (Barth, 238) – essentially, to conceal the reality of his illness from himself. Similarly, at the instruction of the doctor, Jake begins practicing "Mythotherapy," which is a sort of conscious role-assigning or myth-making in order to cast himself as a character in every situation he encounters, effectively keeping himself engaged in reality and out of paralysis. Just as Todd puts on the masks, Jake assumes these roles or "costumes" (to further the metaphor). Regardless of how inauthentic these attempts seem, each character uses them as a defense against their underlying illness and deeper emotional issues. Stanley Fogel clarifies this analogy, theorizing:

> Both protagonists are nihilistic. Todd Andrews of *The Floating* Opera is invigorated by it, but Jake Horner, the narrator of *The End of the Road* is enervated by that same nihilism… Whereas Todd dons his philosophical masks to escape the paralysis resulting from his killing of the German soldier and the suicide of his father, similar masks keep Jake from making solid decisions or recognizing the finality of death and absurdity of life. In this way, Jake's inertia and masks become the tragic mirror of Todd's. The main characters… [and] indeed the books themselves, become doubles, for Barth thinks of these two as a pair: one a nihilistic comedy and the other a nihilistic tragedy. (53)

The connection between the two characters is undeniable, and Barth validates this, saying, "I deliberately had him [Todd] end up with that brave ethical subjectivism… in order that Jacob

Horner might undo that position in #2 and carry all non-mystical value-thinking to the end of the road!" (Noland, 18).

Next, there is the obvious parallel between the two love-triangles: one composed by Todd, his best friend Harrison Mack, and Harrison's wife Jane; and the other involving Jake, his coworker Joe Morgan, and Joe's wife Rennie. The first one is actually initiated by Harrison Mack, who we discover prompted his wife to presumptuously offer herself to Todd one day. In fact, Jane also desires the affair, and the couple says that they want it out of their mutual love for Todd. The other example is somewhat less forward, but maintains similar dynamics. Once the Morgans develop a somewhat close relationship with Jake, Joe proposes the premeditated suggestion that Jake begin taking riding lessons with Rennie, as a sort of test of her fidelity. After many weeks of building tension, Jake and Rennie sort of automatically begin this affair when Joe is out of town for a few days; however, they are both overcome with guilt, and Rennie even claims to hate Jake. Joe finds out about the affair, and even though he did not explicitly arrange this situation in the way Harrison did, he promotes it by perversely forcing them to continue the affair so they can come to terms with their motives for initiating it in the first place.

Another commonality is that both novels focus on controversial issues. Of central importance in the first work is Todd's contemplation of suicide. He must answer the question of whether or not life is worth living. We know his decision, as he is telling the story from the perspective of an aging man, recalling these events from years earlier. Still, he conveys his previous desire to destroy himself with urgency – longing to take matters into his own hands and master the impending fate of death. Similarly, the other novel deals with the issues of suicide and also abortion. Several months after beginning the affair, Rennie becomes pregnant despite using contraceptives with both partners. She is deeply distraught because she doesn't know who the

father is. Out of fear that it might be Jake's child she decides to have the fetus aborted. In fact, she gives Jake an ultimatum: he must make arrangements for her abortion or she will kill herself, rather than have the baby. His task proves harder than he expected – not only is it a small town in which most of the doctors know Rennie and would learn of the affair from her wish for the abortion, but also the other doctors refuse to perform the procedure because of the negative affect it will have on their reputation, as the issue is considered to be taboo. Jake goes to great lengths to orchestrate this, eventually making a large personal and financial commitment to his own doctor, who already practices other extra-legal medicinal therapies, in order for him to do the abortion. His relief is short-lived as there are complications during the procedure and Rennie dies gruesomely on the operation table. All of these common themes result in two very similar novels, and these comparisons make the disparate public reception of the novels even more curious.

Aside from the *Time* magazine review, *The End of the Road* is really only mentioned in two other articles around the time it was published, which are not nearly as extensive as the first. One of these appeared in the *New York Times* about a month prior to its release. It simply states that a new novel by John Barth, author of *The Floating Opera*, will be released the following month, and gives a very general, two-sentence description of the plot ("Books – Authors," 27). This is worth noting because in addition to their review of the first novel, it is curious that they would express anticipation for the book in this blurb but never follow with a proper review of it. The second reference is found in *The Washington Post* towards the end of the year. This article, appropriately titled "Some 1958 Novels Remained in Orbit," lists a twenty or so noteworthy works from that year (Davenport, E6). Because of its fairly quiet release, it is significant that *The End of the Road* appears in this narrow selection of books, alongside some of the year's top best

sellers, including Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, who won the 1958 Nobel Prize in Literature. Even so, it appears on the second page under the telling subtitle, "Some Fine Novels Slighted" (E9). It is intriguing that they recognized this work as being overlooked, conveying a sense that its critical opinion is already beginning to shift after just a few months. The insightful caption for this group also implies that the works have been under recognized and perhaps misunderstood and foresees a brighter future for them, stating, "SOME OF the year's finest novels have scarcely been responsible for a general rush to the bookstores; nonetheless, discerning trackers will be watching these closely for a long time" (E9).

Just a year later, David Kerner commends *Time* for recognizing *The End of the Road*, and draws attention to the fact that it was essentially ignored otherwise. He emphasizes its significance, asserting that it is an opportune piece of literature and is "even rarer than *Time* said, for its genre has yet to be named" (91). He suggests its inability to be classified as a possible explanation for its underwhelming response, stating, "reviewers may have been unable to see something we have no name for" (91). Richard Noland comes a similar conclusion, highlighting the novel's principal fault as "a weakness in characterization" (26), but inaccurately places the defect on the novel itself rather than the critic's understanding. Kerner develops this further, asserting that Barth has evolved the "novel of ideas" genre, in which society and its members are grouped into ideological divisions rather than social classes, and offers "ideological farce" as a name for Barth's special niche. Within the novel, he says, "ideological speculation must be seen as doodling of psychiatric more than thematic relevance" (93). Perhaps naïvely, he dismisses the notion that a deeper thematic meaning lies in the novel and its relevance is strictly literary, the majority of future critics would disagree with this. He observes that Barth doesn't take "the book's psychoses and ideologies seriously – he clowns" (93), but admits that he finds it troubling

how much actuality there is amidst the farce. This echoes the complaint made by Prescott in the *New York Times'* review of *The Floating Opera*, but Kerner places much less weight on the seriousness of Barth's intent. Still, he feels that too much of the novel is feasible as a work of traditional fiction and it lets down the reader who expects more to follow. This sort of reader would find it difficult to know how seriously Barth expects his ideas to be taken, and this is yet another explanation for disinterest in the novel. Although he previously credits *Time* for their recognition of the book, he questions whether their interest was erroneously rooted in its ideological elements or for its literary relevance. He expresses that the novel lacks any ideological accomplishment but overall is a literary achievement because of Bath's attempt "to blend novel, ideology, allegory, psychodrama, and farce" (94).

Over a decade later in 1970, Daniel Majdiak reflects on Barth's innovative contributions to literary fiction in regards to the ideas outlined by Barth himself in his eminent article, "The Literature of Exhaustion," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* a few years earlier. Barth elucidates his efforts within his body of literature as deliberate imitations of conventional novels and of history itself, which "attempt to represent not life directly, but a representation of life" (Majdiak, 96). Majdiak states that critics have accurately connected these ideas with Barth's more recent works at the time, namely *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat*-Boy, but points out that they are equally applicable to Barth's first two novels. In particular, he relates them to *The End of the Road*, which he describes as "Barth's first wholly successful work" (96). He makes a momentous distinction here to a work that has been virtually overshadowed by its predecessor for more than a decade. Implicit to his lengthy, pertinent analysis is his appreciation of the novel's ability to show "the vitality of art in its ability to reshape old forms to create new ones" (108), reinforcing its innovative qualities. In addition to his unprecedented recognition of the novel, he is the first

critic to offer a clear suggestion of Barth's intent, stating, "Though Barth's purpose is to discredit the norms which the novel assumes, he does this to render a more credible picture of reality through a more viable fictional form" (103). This concise interpretation is on the mark and extremely helpful in reconciling the confusion expressed by past critics about the manner in which to approach the novel. Majdiak's critical evaluation alone may be responsible for a renewed interest in *The End of The Road*, which is the subject of dozens of further analyses in the decades to follow. In fact, in 1979, Robert Hoskins notes "critics have be rather generous with their attention to this early novel" (18), implying that it has received far more consideration than it deserves – a statement that could not have been made a decade earlier, regardless of its validity.

Several other critics follow Majdiak's lead, discovering fresh ideas and themes through examination of Barth's later novels and projecting these back upon his first two, providing the early works with newfound significance. Joseph J. Waldmeir makes this observation in the introduction to his anthology of critical essays on Barth. He begins by offering the conservative climate of the fifties as an explanation of many reviewers' initial rejection of *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road,* which were charged as being immoral, gratuitously sexual, and salacious; however, this distaste soon faded with both the change in the general reader's attitude with the onset of the sixties as well as the increasing respect given to Barth as a writer and thinker. After the success of Barth's later novels, "critics began to give Barth credit for a more conscious, rather than accidental or incidental, philosophical awareness if not position" (Waldmeir x). In light of this refined understanding of Barth's philosophical nihilism, his first two novels become "far clearer and more respectable" (x). This is yet another validation that these novels were published before their own time in some way – essentially predating their

audience's capacity to understand and appreciate them. Beverly Gross comes to a similar conclusion, reasoning that while many books become clearer upon re-reading them, this is not so much true for Barth's individual works as it is for his "corpus" (Waldmeir 30). Each novel, she explains, is a stride toward the fulfillment of a single idea shared by all of them, which she defines as the "repudiation of narrative art" (30). Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that before Barth had a body of literature under his belt, his first novels might seem irritatingly inconsistent and misdirected, because each book by itself is merely a single ingredient to a more grandiose creation.

In addition to Majdiak's claim that the significance of the novel lies in its literary innovations and reshaping of older forms, many other claims of its consequence follow. Andrew Gordon argues that the multitude of interpretations are the result of the novel's ambiguity and transmission of bleak messages; however, this assumption seems narrow in focus – the abundance of powerful meaning and potentially conflicting themes are the more likely force behind the ongoing dialogue. Another critic defends a two-part purpose of the novel to address both individuals who attempt to withdraw themselves from society and a sex-oriented world (Verzosa, 187). Barth shows that regardless of how distant Jake tried to keep himself from others and how meaningless he believed his actions to be, his existence and behavior has a profound impact on the people in his life. Additionally, Verzosa points out that sex has a dualistic quality to both create life and destroy it. To emphasize the destructive nature of sex, she connects Jake's sexual exploits to Rennie's horrifying abortion, which effectively kills both the unborn fetus and herself. Another example reinforcing this idea is the damaging effect of Jake's sexual encounters on Peggy and her self-image. One more perspective on the novel's significance is seen in Robert Ackerman's thesis, in which he attributes Barth's first two works as originating the comic genius

he is commended for with his later novels. Another critic, Jack David, uplifts Barth's linguistic achievements in the novel, addressing both his creative use of language and his invention of words, such as "cosmopsis." Similarly, Charles Harris views that Barth's purpose is to resolve "words and worlds… in unified harmony" (8). While many critics diminish the intended meaning of the novel because of its satirical elements, Stanley Fogel emphasizes the seriousness in the book that he feels is too readily ignored. In fact, he defends that compared to Barth's other novels, *The End of the Road* remains the darkest, explaining, "The nihilism here is more intense than in *The Floating Opera*. The tongue-in-cheek quality of Barth's later parodic fictions is absent" (54)

Additionally, I believe *The End of the Road* has significance for its postmodern ideas. Barth is revered as a pioneer in postmodernism, but this is mostly in relation to his later works. Charles Harris defines *The Sot-Weed Factor* as Barth's first postmodern novel, but there are many strong postmodern themes working in *The End of the Road* also, primarily within Jake and Joe's discussions. For example, one major postmodern theme is that there exists no absolute truth, but rather subjective, individual perceptions. This is highlighted in the Morgan's view of marriage, as Joe says "it's no absolute, you have to decide for yourself the conditions under which marriage is important to you" (295). Similarly, he states, "nothing is ultimately defensible" (297) emphasizing the idea that it is futile to look for objectivity. Next, postmodern thought resists the use of sharp classifications, and this is made clear in the way that Jake views himself and others. This is apparent in the way Jake assigns people roles, which he confesses are merely "essences you have assigned them, at least temporarily, for your own purposes… while you know very well that no historical human being was ever *just* an Obliging Filling-Station Attendant or a Handsome Young Poet" (279). He admits that although sometimes he necessarily

applies sharp classifications, these are really just superficial labels and do not account for the entirety of the individual. Postmodernism also places emphasis on the role of power relations, as is displayed by the Morgan's relationship. Jake frequently compares their relationship to that of a parent and a child, a tutor and his student, or "Pygmalion and Galatea" (283). One aspect of this image is that Joe views his wife somewhat admiringly as a creation of his own; however, there is an inherent power dynamic set here, in which Rennie is a "blank canvas" or a "vacuum," and thus without Joe she is worthless. Last, the postmodern importance of motivations is vital to the narrative, and is frequently discussed by the characters. Jake believes that his motives do not necessarily equate with his actions, as he claims that he may very well come to dinner out of politeness, even though he doesn't want to. Joe argues the opposite and believes that people act according to their motivations alone and that deep down the pros outweigh the cons of one's actions, even if it is not conscious. For this reason he believes that he must understand Jake and Rennie's motivations for their affair in order to determine how to react to the situation. In addition to these examples, there are many other postmodern elements in the novel to the extent that it is arguably Barth's entry into postmodernism.

It is now evident that *The End of the Road* has much significance, but the question of why it was overlooked early on still persists. Andrew Gordon agrees with Kerner's earlier argument, reasoning, "The difficulty that many critics have had in interpreting *The End of the Road* perhaps stems from the fact that they tend to accept at face value Jake's version of himself and of the events and Jake's value system" (4), insinuating that Jake is perhaps an unreliable narrative because of his psychological issues. However, a similar argument could be made for Todd in *The Floating Opera*, so these explanations do not answer why Barth's first novel achieved a considerably larger amount of success than his second, as it's National Book Award nomination

suggests. In fact, Thomas Carmichael makes the conclusion that both narrators are indeed unreliable in his examination of the discrepancies of time in their recollection of the events contained in the novels. This presents the image of capricious, uncertain narrators who should not be taken at face value. In the same way, Waldmeir's suggestion, that the intolerant atmosphere of the fifties accounts for critics' subdued reactions, would apply to both of Barth's early novels. So what difference is there between these two works? Stanley Fogel mentions that Barth was unhappy with the first edition of *The Floating Opera*, which contained structural and tonal changes imposed by the publisher. As a result he published a revised version eleven years later, restoring it to his original design. He also revised and republished *The End of the Road*, but Fogel comments, "Unlike the first book, the second did not require major structural shifts – only a little fine tuning" (52). Perhaps the publisher was conscious of the way the books would be received in the fifties, and the more extensive revision of the first book resulted in a better response and greater success. Additionally, although both novels are published in the fifties, *The Floating Opera* is set twenty years earlier, after WWI during the Great Depression. On the other hand, *The End of the Road* was set just a few years before the time it was published, but essentially in the same social context. Perhaps this setting is too soon, in a sense, and the novel's controversial content is more threatening against the contemporaneous backdrop. David Kerner defends that Jake's relevance lies in his multifarious nature, calling him "a protean, chameleon human," who "threatens anything that claims identity, permanence, meaning or value. He is the ultimate antagonist" (93). This adverse characteristic of the protagonist may be another reason the book was not an instant success – in the midst of the Cold War, a great international ideological standoff pitting Capitalism vs. Communism, West vs. East, Hero vs. Villain, etc., everyone is holding tight to their belief systems. The idea that one's beliefs are superior to

another's is the last hope for triumph over the enemy in a time when sheer power and technological sophistication are unquantifiable for the average person. With the looming threat of nuclear weapons, one country's advantage over another is inconceivable – everyone feels vulnerable because both sides have the power to destroy the entire world. Additionally, after the recent successful satellite launches, the earth is now continuous with the rest of the expansive universe and the individual person feels smaller than ever. People fear the loss of their ideology because that is what gives them an edge on their opponent and everyone else for that matter, and they reject anyone that threatens their beliefs. Jake and the novel itself represent the all-encompassing threat to meaning and value. For this reason, Kerner says that the novel has "unnerving power" (93), and as a result, objective values are rebuffed and philosophical talk becomes a spectacle. This major difference in the social contexts of the two books may also explain the better reception of Barth's first novel.

In conclusion, it is apparent *The End of the Road* has a curious history. As the second installment of the earliest of Barth's characteristic novel pairs, it is surprising that it did not initially experience much recognition after an anticipated release and the success of its predecessor. Interestingly, an analogous situation occurred with a cinematic rendition of the book in 1969. Despite its acclaimed director, noteworthy actors, and substantial media hype (including an "unprecedented eight-page spread" in life magazine), the film was largely a failure (Pellow, 38). Few journalists acknowledged the film after its release, it saw minuscule numbers in box offices, and it was nearly impossible to locate after it left theatres, as it was not readily available in video stores. All this is not to say that the film shared the same problems as the book, because the failure of the film was largely due to the difficulty of adapting such a philosophical book to a general audience motion picture, but it is an amusing comparison none-the-less. It is almost as if

there is a sort of curse afflicting the novel, especially since the book's initial response remains largely unexplained. Ultimately, all of the challenges the novel has overcome makes its recovery and modern significance that much more impressive. Over time, the reputations of novel and of Barth himself have improved dramatically, and are now regarded with tremendous honor. Today there is a large body of literature surrounding *The End of the Road* with an excellent coverage of the novel's major themes and significance; however, further discussion of its complexities is inevitable, and questions about the early critics' underwhelming responses remain unanswered.

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