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Howard Holzer:

*Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President*

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Douglas L. Wilson:

*Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*

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When American newspapers recently reported that some twenty percent of Democratic voters supporting Democrat Hillary Clinton in the coming presidential race would either back the Republican candidate or not vote at all rather than support Barack Obama, should he win his party's endorsement, a subscriber to the h-rhetor listserv posted a query: what speech could Obama give to win those voters back? The writer was likely prompted by Obama's widely-praised March 18 speech on race, which historian Garry Wills has compared to Lincoln's Cooper Union address.<sup>1</sup> The query provoked an unusually large and robust response on h-rhetor, but more telling than anything in the replies was the fact that the question was asked at all. Americans, it seems, are still, in this age of electronic media, strong believers in the power of a single speech to move political mountains. To put it another way, it would seem that Americans long for leadership driven through eloquence. Readers interested in just how that can be done – or at least, was once done – as well as scholars interested in the rhetorical and sociological dynamics of that longing would do well to turn to two recent books about Lincoln, one a probing kairotic study of the Cooper Union Address, the other an investigation of Lincoln's practices as a writer.

## I.

Howard Holzer's *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President* presents an analysis of the famed 1860 speech, with particular attention to the historical, political, and personal context before during and after its delivery. Holzer is the author, co-author, or editor of twenty-two books on Lincoln and the Civil War, including the only complete and unexpurgated edition of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 – much of which must account for the mastery of detail that figures in this study. The book consists of an introduction, nine

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21290>; the parallels are indeed remarkable.

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chapters, an epilogue, and an appendix containing what Holzer hopes is the “definitive text” of Lincoln’s address. Readers broadly familiar with the speech may wish to begin with this (pp. 249-284), an “amalgam” (p. 249) made from the annotated version published in 1860 by the Young Men’s Republican Union (itself based on an edition corrected by Lincoln and published in the *New York Tribune*) along with insertions of audience reaction (interestingly recorded only by the pro-Democrat *New York Herald*) and a few editorial notes added by Holzer.

The introduction (pp. 1-6) poses the overarching question, “Why did this voluminous, legalistic, tightly argued, fact-filled address prove so thrilling to its listeners, so irresistible to contemporary journalists, and such a boost to Lincoln’s political career?” (p. 1). There is no denying that without the success of this speech, this minor western candidate would never have become president, and American history since would quite likely have been very different. Holzer’s first five chapters richly narrate the circumstances leading up to the speech, beginning in Chapter One (“Abe Lincoln Must Come”, pp. 7-27) with the delight Lincoln must have experienced at the invitation, sent by the New York Republican James Briggs, to come speak at Henry Ward Beecher’s church in Brooklyn – even while he knew that it was a ploy to advance other candidates against the presumptive presidential hopeful William H. Seward. To better his odds, Lincoln would have to produce nothing short of a masterful performance. The effort in research and drafting – described in Chapter Two (“So Much Labor as This”, pp. 28-54) – was massive, and he undertook it even amid other political activity, court appearances, and speaking engagements, some of which foreshadowed the address to come. “So began”, notes Holzer, “what deserves to be recognized as the final round of the Lincoln-Douglas debates” (p. 27): Lincoln would once and for all demolish Stephen A. Douglas’s notion of ‘popular sovereignty’, that is, the argument that the federal government was constitutionally forbidden from interfering in the expansion of slavery to territories. He would decisively elevate his own presidential prospects in the process.

Were the rhetorical challenge not enough, Chapter Three (“Some Confusion in the Arrangements”, pp. 55-80) describes the many hardships of rail travel in the 1860s as well as logistical confusions about where Lincoln was to speak (he had written his speech for Beecher’s church-going audience and didn’t find out about the venue change to the Cooper Institute until he arrived in New York two days prior). Readers are also vividly immersed in the ambiance of rough-and-tumble New York City, with its bustling throngs, impressive buildings, popular amusements and spectacles, dirt, poverty, and, most dauntingly for Lincoln, Democratic leanings. Chapter Four (“Much the Best Portrait”, pp. 81-104) continues to build the political suspense while detouring into an account of Lincoln sitting for the famed photographer Matthew Brady. Reproductions of the photograph (which appear among the book’s illustrations) would later become widely-circulated tokens in Lincoln’s presidential bid, and Lincoln is reputed to have claimed later that “Brady and the Cooper Union speech made me president” (p. 100). Chapter Five (“Nothing Impressive About Him, pp. 105-118) uses eyewitness accounts to make us sense Lincoln’s pre-speech nerves, compounded by a touchingly human embarrassment at his own ill-tailored clothes; he later told William Herndon, his Springfield law partner, that he was “greatly abashed over his personal appearance” (p. 110). But the real basis for concern would have been the task before him, which Holzer neatly distills into five strategic objectives: (1) to show his intellectual wisdom as “a thoughtful statesman, not just a frontier speechmaker” (p. 117); (2) to outperform previous speakers in the lecture series; (3) to distinguish himself as a leading contender for the Republican nomination, yet without offending the liberal Republican base; (4) to advance a constitutionally sound Republican antislavery position; and (5) to demonstrate the historical and legal bankruptcy of ‘popular sovereignty’ and its Democratic supporters.

With Chapter Six (“The Strength of Absolute Simplicity”, pp. 119-148) Holzer treats the speech itself, following along with Lincoln’s “three distinct speeches in one” (p. 115): a square refutation of Douglas’s view that the Framers supported anything resembling ‘popular sovereignty’; a critique “disguised as an appeal” (p. 115) of the South; and a call for Republicans to rally behind anti-slavery principles. While Holzer’s reading of the speech is generally clear and at moments insightful, it is not especially new. At a number of points, he claims to be correcting previous historians’ misinterpretations – for example of the speech’s alleged conservatism (p. 134) or conciliatory tone (p. 136) – but supplies no footnotes to the erring texts. Holzer’s attempts at stylistic analysis also sometimes bog down in confusion. He attends to Lincoln’s blistering repetitions (with careful numerical tallies) as well as to his many parallel constructions, but strangely appropriates the term ‘antiphony’ (generally used in music, rarely in rhetoric, to refer to call-and-response) to account for “alternatively parallel and contradictory double phrasing” (p. 124). These phrases he lays out in two columns over several pages (pp. 124-125 and 142), but it is difficult to see this “demanding device” (p. 124) of antiphony working as a ‘device’ in the speech. Beyond noticing the ‘antiphony’, Holzer doesn’t explain any overall effect that makes antiphony here distinct from good argumentation. With Michael Leff and Gerald Mohrmann,<sup>2</sup> Holzer aptly praises Lincoln’s use of prosopopoeia, but then also his use of *ad hominem* argumentation (usually accounted a logical fallacy). He makes nothing of prominent rhetorical and dialectical devices in the speech (not that Lincoln would have known them by name) such as antithesis, apposition, anaphora, epistrophe, assonance, zeugma, erotema, paradox, litotes, irony, dilemma, enthymeme, or *a fortiori* arguments. Indeed, this partial list suggests that there is far more evidence than Holzer adduces to support his apt judgment that the “voluminous, legalistic, tightly argued, fact-filled address” is a “magnificent anomaly” (p. 144): posing as a cautionary history lesson, the address is a stealthy oration through and through, which explains the audience’s powerful reaction. Holzer also makes too little of Lincoln’s distinct touches of Protestant homiletics – beginning with the adoption of a ‘text’ for study, moving through a kind of scriptural exegesis, and concluding with the moral and spiritual lesson to be drawn. The address was, after all, initially penned with a church audience in mind.

Holzer’s final three chapters return to what is best in the book: the rich description of the surrounding circumstances of the speech. Chapters Seven (“Such an Impression”, pp. 149-174) and Eight (“Unable to Escape this Toil”, pp. 175-205) describe the considerable afterlife of the speech – notably its publication in various partisan newspapers (most interestingly, its nasty reception by Southern and Democratic outlets); the uptick in Lincoln’s presidential candidate stock; Seward’s parallel speech on the Senate floor two days later; and Lincoln’s triumphant reprise engagements – eleven in all – in a grueling two-week tour of Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Exhausted, he declined multiple invitations to speak in Maine, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Holzer convincingly demonstrates the importance of the eleven repeat performances for the later reputation of the Cooper Union address and for Lincoln’s growing renown as a serious contender to be his party’s standard-bearer. Far from a mere happenstance of Lincoln’s side-trip to visit his son at Exeter in New Hampshire, these encore performances were a shrewd political calculation to advance his presidential ambitions. It worked. Large audiences everywhere were electrified, and Lincoln subsequently won the Republican nomination. Nevertheless, at one point on his circuit, he confessed to be astonished by his success, and in particular by the fact that a professor of rhetoric at Yale (unnamed) had lectured

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<sup>2</sup> Holzer fails to give the bibliographical reference: Michael C. Leff and Gerald P. Mohrmann, “Lincoln at Cooper Union: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Text”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974), pp. 346–358.

on the Cooper Union address the following day. For himself Lincoln regarded his rhetorical skill as “a subject which has been dark to me” (p. 199).

Still, until the nomination, Lincoln continued to give speeches after returning to Illinois, “as if public speaking were a drug, and Lincoln a hopeless addict” (p. 210). Once nominated, though, he showed his equal mastery of the rhetoric of silence. Rather than speak, he allowed his previous speeches to do all the talking; his sphinx-like refusal to speak must be considered another part of Cooper Union’s success. Holzer’s ninth and final chapter (“Preserve It for Your Children”, pp. 206-238) most valuably recounts Lincoln’s exchanges with Charles C. Knott, who, along with another member of the Young Men’s Central Republican Union, Cephas Brainerd, took on the publishing of an edition of the Cooper Union address along with dense footnotes to Lincoln’s legal and historical sources. (This is the edition that is the principle source of Holzer’s own ‘definitive’ edition.) Lacking time to reconstruct his research for them, Lincoln left them to duplicate the speech on their own, and they were staggered to discover just how much preparation had gone into it. Although Holzer doesn’t use the term *kairos*, he demonstrates throughout this last chapter how such circumstances really are part of the speech: “time, place and technology [i.e. print, photography, and photo reproduction] happily conspired to Lincoln’s enormous benefit” (p. 232). What we call the Cooper Union address was more than a speech, Holzer concludes: it was “a public relations triumph,” “a political coup d’état”, and an “image transformation” (p. 237).

In his Epilogue (pp. 239-248), Holzer notes that circumstances can only count for so much, as Seward, now appointed Secretary of State, would discover when he helped Lincoln draft his Inaugural Address: Lincoln had triumphed in large measure because of “his better instinct for the spoken word, and his vastly superior craftsmanship as a writer” (p. 242).

Holzer’s book succeeds in reanimating what has sometimes been regarded as a relatively dry political address in the context of all the political, personal, and historical circumstances surrounding it. This he does so extensively and precisely that it is remarkable to note that the book nonetheless reads at times almost like a novel. It should satisfy amateur admirers of Lincoln’s eloquence, yet it will also be important to historians and critics of Lincoln’s rhetoric, as well as to those studying presidential campaign rhetoric generally. As a specimen of rhetorical criticism, it has shortcomings where formal analysis is concerned, but these are eclipsed by Holzer’s great contribution to our kairotic understanding of the speech. Indeed, *Lincoln at Cooper Union* is exemplary for its attention to the way the event of the speech emerges as something quite beyond the confines of the written or spoken text, a recognition that should be the starting point for formal analysis.

## II.

Readers who want to understand Lincoln’s craftsmanship as a writer can now turn to a penetrating book on the subject, namely Douglas L. Wilson’s *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*. The book consists of a prologue, nine chapters, an epilogue, and an appendix describing Lincoln’s post-delivery emendations to the Gettysburg address. Wilson co-directs the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College, is the author of two previous monographs on Lincoln, and has co-edited two related volumes: an edition of the landmark Lincoln biography by William Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner of 16 years, as well as a collection of Herndon’s papers related to Lincoln.

In his Prologue (pp. 3-9), Wilson explains that his book emerged from a three-year project of editing and annotating Lincoln's personal papers for the Library of Congress website<sup>3</sup> – a massive project involving some 20,000 scanned and searchable items that has produced a truly magnificent resource for researchers. Dozens of document images from this and other collections appear in the book. Wilson also announces his aim as “exploring the circumstances associated with the creation of certain documents and illuminating, wherever possible, the role such writing played in Lincoln's Presidency” (p. 9). He explicitly claims that his aim is *not* to give paramount attention to such things as any given document's “historical context, its content, its rhetorical strategy, its style, its intended and its actual effect” (p. 9), although indeed he does give a great deal of attention to these things, as it would be hard to imagine what the circumstances of creation would be without them. Wilson also reminds his readers here that Lincoln's literary achievement as President came as a stunning revelation to many of his contemporaries, who had far lower expectations for the unassuming Illinois congressman. Most of the book thereafter is devoted to showing the depth of that underestimation.

To get at that, Wilson believes, requires a close examination of Lincoln's literary practices. In Chapter One (“Springfield Farewell”, pp. 10-18), Wilson begins by recounting Lincoln's famous Springfield farewell address, only to demonstrate that the version memorialized in biographies, supposedly authoritative because it came from Lincoln's handwritten text, is an after-the-fact revision quite different from the words he delivered. The actual event, according to cross-referenced eyewitness accounts, was a nakedly emotional plea for divine assistance that worked well *in situ*, but that, Lincoln knew, would not survive translation to the page. Lincoln's written version, by contrast, works to convey sense and feeling through diction, grammatical economy, and devices such as antithesis and alliteration. Lincoln's sense of ‘live’ rhetorical *kairos*, in other words, was keen, as was his understanding that similar success could be had in writing only if composition were crafted for the specific characteristics of that medium.

Chapter Two (“A Long Foreground”, pp. 19-41) demonstrates that this skill did not come out of the blue: the young Lincoln was perhaps a “failed poet” (p. 25), but one who from an early age labored hard at the craft of composition. Across a selection of early texts, we see Lincoln experimenting with conventional forms of antebellum oratory to develop his own style, one marked more by restraint, clarity, and reason than by poetic exuberance or flourish. Wilson quotes a telling but little known and only partially extant early lecture by Lincoln (regarded as a failure by author and audiences alike) entitled “Discoveries and Inventions”, in which he holds that human progress is owed principally to one accomplishment: “*Writing* – the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the eye – is the greatest invention of the world” (p. 41). Wilson notes the intriguing fact that in his manuscript Lincoln had first written “*Writing and Printing*, taken as whole”, but then emended it to read “*Writing*” only. This works well to justify the literary approach of Wilson's book, yet it can't be easily reconciled with Lincoln's firm derogation of writing in that same jumbled lecture (this is not mentioned by Wilson): “*Marks* for the recognition of the eye – *writing* – although a wonderful auxiliary for speech, is no worthy substitute for it.”<sup>4</sup>

Chapter Three (“A Custom as Old as the Government”, pp. 42-70) focuses on the First Inaugural Address and is Wilson's opportunity to turn our attention to Lincoln's mastery of ‘tone’: “Created by a calculated choice of words, tone is what indicates the writer's *attitude*, over and above his literal meaning” (p. 47; original emphasis). Rhetorical critics may find this a rather dull blade. Wilson uses it to show that a forceful and relatively uncompromising ‘first edition’ of the address – that is, the first of four typeset copies Lincoln had prepared as he was

<sup>3</sup> See <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/discoveries.htm>.

drafting, a practice intriguing in itself – was toned down over the course of later revisions, principally in response to the written suggestions of his Secretary of State, William Seward, who urged a more diplomatic approach towards the South and its sympathizers. This is old ground, but Wilson adds new detail and is insightful in showing that this mastery of ‘tone’ is really a performance of Lincoln’s own pragmatic temperament: as a writer “he could go in different directions, and do so effectively” (p. 69).

Chapter Four (“The Message of July 4, 1861”, pp. 70-104) examines Lincoln’s preparation of an address to the special session of Congress convened following the April 12, 1861 assault on Fort Sumter. Wilson shows readers how, rather than delegate the redacting of a factual report, Lincoln meticulously crafted his Message through multiple stages and worked with others to fine-tune its rhetorical impact and reach. The archival record of successive drafts, the most complete for any Lincoln speech, affords an excellent chance to “look over the writer’s shoulder” as he wrote (p. 76). Wilson’s reconstruction of the process shows Lincoln moving from a surprisingly autobiographical early draft, mainly tactical in focus, to a resolute articulation of administrative unity resonating with historical and constitutional implication. Thus, for Lincoln was the writing process no mere communication exercise but an act of political discovery.

In Chapter Five (“Proclaiming Emancipation”, pp. 105-142) Wilson turns his attention to perhaps the strangest of all Lincoln documents. The Emancipation Proclamation, a work “conspicuously unquotable”, “utterly utilitarian” (p. 105), and “legalistic with a vengeance” (p. 129), is traced through its highly complex history, which included “hapless ventures with conciliation, compensation, and colonization” (p. 111). Wilson leans heavily on Allen C. Guelzo’s *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), showing how the President eventually persuaded himself of the final version through a series of tactical trials and re-writes over a period of months. What Wilson emphasizes is that the political process was for Lincoln first of all a process of composition. The greatness of the Great Emancipator was not as some plain-spoken political oracle, but as a pragmatic writer who solicited views, tried them out on paper, rewrote, and repeated. The resulting document, in Wilson’s smart summation, “succeeded not by eloquence, but by inexact language exquisitely suited to the occasion” (p. 142).

Lincoln’s sense of the moment and openness to editorial suggestion is again featured in Chapter Six (“Public Opinion”, pp. 143-161), which is devoted to Lincoln’s well-known public letter replying to *New York Tribune* editor Andrew Greeley’s criticism of the administration’s delay in carrying out provisions of the second Confiscation Act. Lincoln had been looking for an opportunity to shape public opinion in favor of his now famous policy statement that “I would save the Union” (p. 151), and Greeley supplied it. Wilson focuses here on Lincoln’s use of emphasis; his dropping of a phrase found undignified by an editor; subtle but important nuances in diction; and his enactment of Aristotelian *ethos*. He further suggests, albeit tentatively, that the slowness of Lincoln’s writing process was structurally one with his political gradualism, a very provocative insight that Wilson might have developed further.

Chapter Seven (“Rising with Each New Effort”, pp. 162-197) looks at Lincoln’s skill not just as a re-writer, but as a “prewriter” – that is, his penchant for writing ideas, often on random scraps of paper, then tucking them away, reworking them as he was inspired, and finally having them at the ready when circumstances ripened. This was evidently Lincoln’s procedure in a number of public letters issued in 1863. For example, his open letter to Erastus Corning, a businessman and former congressman who convened a meeting of New York Democrats critical of military arrests under the suspended writ of habeas corpus, was probably so constructed. Through the revisions evident in manuscript, we see Lincoln’s “toned down” (p. 170) version emerge, this time not at the behest of a Seward, but by his own hand. Once establishing his

Constitutional position, however, Lincoln goes for the emotional jugular with this famous line, cut down from a rambling period three times longer than he likely had at the ready: “Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wiley [*sic*] agitator who induces him to desert?” (p. 173). Wilson regards the practice of such advance conception as central to Lincoln’s method of writing.

Wilson’s eighth chapter (“The Gettysburg Address”, pp. 198-237) takes up the case *par excellence* of such pre-writing. He shows how the central move in the Address, asserting the primacy of the Declaration’s claim that “all men are created equal”, had “a very long gestation period indeed, predating even the presidency” (p. 208). Wilson expertly narrates the conflicting accounts regarding the more proximate construction of the address, even supplying a detailed appendix weighing the differences in the various post-delivery revisions by Lincoln. All of this amounts, once again, to evidence of a “serious literary craftsman laboring to perfect an important work” (p. 225). Wilson’s rehearsal of testimony that the audience was stunned and silent suggests that indeed Lincoln’s objective was primarily literary, not oratorical – rhetorical, yes, but designed for the page more than the podium.

Wilson’s final chapter (“A Truth That Needed to Be Told”, pp. 238-277), uses several private letters by Lincoln to set up an analysis of the Second Inaugural. Although Wilson once again provides ample evidence in support of his argument that Lincoln’s political imagination was abetted by his writing practices (the letters give inklings of the masterpiece to come), readers of *Rhetorical Review* may sense a problem in Wilson’s attempt to keep separate the facts of literary creation and matters of rhetorical strategy. The climax of this climactic chapter is mainly stylistic analysis of the address, but Wilson here is disappointingly vague. Readers are told that the work is “distinctly cadenced” (p. 270), yet there is no distinct treatment of rhythm or emphasis. Likewise Wilson is more content with telling readers that the speech builds to a “heightened effect” (p. 270) and canny “feel” (p. 275) than with litmusing the etiology of those effects. Wilson attends to figuration but fails to distinguish between figures of thought and speech, then further confuses figures within those categories: antithesis becomes a catch-all for parallelism; metonymy is mistaken for synecdoche; epistrophe and polysyndeton – key figural features of the address – are not mentioned. These errors perhaps contribute to Wilson’s understated reading of the speech’s main theme, which he claims is the urging of “magnanimity” upon the victors towards the vanquished (p. 275). But Lincoln’s speech is not merely about civic or moral virtue, as Frederick Douglas understood well when, at a reception following the Inaugural Address, he told the President he thought it a “sacred effort” (p. 277). Wilson mis-gauges this radically ‘sacred’ intent, which is particularly evident in Lincoln’s masterfully crafted final sentence:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with the world.

Beginning in the realm of human action with the antistrophic “With malice toward none; with charity for all”, Lincoln moves sequentially through the transcendent revisions of the epistrophic “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right”. The sentence then moves from the abstract metaphoric “nation’s wounds” to the increasingly concrete and innocent victims of war – soldier, widow, orphan – whose “care” is the central object of the “work we are in”. “Care”, which appears at the very center of the famous seventy-five word sentence, resonates with “charity” near its beginning and with the ending’s hope for a peace to “cherish”. The sentence’s master figure is thus a loose but unmistakable polyptoton, repeating a series of closely related words. The result is a performative effect: the “binding” of the nation’s wounds

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is formally begun in the sentence, which is itself bound together with a semantic undercurrent of divine love. Wilson's chapter expertly reconstructs the textual genealogy of the speech, but in summing it up as urging magnanimity, he misses its thematic core, as well as the 'tone', which is manifestly that of prayer.

The book concludes with a short Epilogue ("A Noteable Elevation of Thought", pp. 279-284) noting that, all craft aside, Lincoln's achievement was one of character marked by sincerity and conviction, leavened with a talent for "common experience and speech" (p. 280). In the end, Lincoln was "a distinctively American writer" (p. 282). Readers of Wilson's book will appreciate that fact in finer detail than is available anywhere else.

*Lincoln's Sword* stands as a serious and invaluable contribution to our understanding of Lincoln's rhetorical practices. It is a work of considerable historical and textual scholarship, of tremendous value not only to Lincoln scholars, but also to critics and theorists interested in the relationships between rhetorical practice (particularly written practice) and modes of political action. For that matter, it may be of interest to composition theorists; and yet Wilson himself writes in such a clear and engaging manner that his book should be accessible to a general readership as well.

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