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## Editoriale

### SCRITTURA

Non si può che partire da qui: «Ma sopra tutte le invenzioni stupende, qual eminenza di mente fu quella di colui che s'immaginò di trovar modo di comunicare i suoi più reconditi pensieri a qualsivoglia altra persona, benché distante per lunghissimo intervallo di luogo e di tempo? parlare con quelli che son nell'Indie, parlare a quelli che non sono ancora nati né saranno se non di qua a dieci mila anni? e con qual facilità? con i vari accozzamenti di venti caratteruzzi sopra una carta. Sia questo il sigillo di tutte le ammirande invenzioni umane»<sup>1</sup>.

Il giustamente celebre brano del *Dialogo* di Galilei sintetizza infatti in modo limpido ed efficace il *miracolo* che la scrittura rappresenta. Essa è davvero un'invenzione e un dispositivo capace di oltrepassare le distanze dello spazio, del tempo, delle culture, della storia. Richiede, certo, la conoscenza e la familiarità con uno o più codici linguistici ma l'esperienza delle istituzioni culturali e della vita collettiva ha prodotto modalità di traduzione e di trasmissione che rendono le scritture tra di loro interoperabili e quindi capaci di parlare in universale.

La scrittura non è l'oralità. Non è possibile condividere la tesi (alla quale abbiamo comunque dato spazio in questo numero) di un impoverimento prodotto dalla scrittura sulla conoscenza e sull'esperienza umana. Al contrario, essa ha rafforzato l'intelligenza, la fecondità, la profondità delle conoscenze negli ambiti più diversi del pensare e dell'essere. Bisogna, inoltre e specialmente, ricordare che mentre il linguaggio orale è innato (anche nel senso chiarito da Noam Chomsky), la scrittura è tutt'altra tecnica, la quale richiede impegno per essere appresa, favorisce una comprensione più completa delle esperienze e delle conoscenze umane, segna una distanza tra l'istante della vita e la meditazione su di esso. Distanza che si può ben definire uno dei segreti della vita umana diventata non soltanto βίος ma anche ποιήσις, non soltanto esperienza immediata ma capacità di costruire il mondo da una prospettiva che lo comprende.

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1 G. Galilei, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*, Einaudi, Torino 1982, Dialogo I, p. 130.

E non va dimenticato lo splendido paradosso per il quale il Platone che fa emergere i danni della scrittura espone tali pericoli in una magnifica opera *scritta*, il *Fedro*. Se non ci fosse stato Platone a scrivere (e Aristotele e Senofonte e Aristofane), Socrate non esisterebbe. Se non ci fosse stata la prima comunità cristiana a redigere i *Vangeli*, il Rabbi Gesù sarebbe rimasto soltanto uno dei tanti e anonimi profeti eliminati dalle istituzioni israelitiche del Sinedrio e dall'autorità dell'Impero romano. Se non ci fosse stata la miriade di discepoli e continuatori, Buddha sarebbe sconosciuto.

In sintesi, la scrittura è la conoscenza, la conoscenza è il meglio dell'umanità, la scrittura è dunque il distillato della benedizione umana, che attenua almeno un poco la ferocia della specie.

La scrittura diventa infatti a volte la registrazione più perfetta del dolore e della fatica degli umani. Lo diventa nei grandi narratori, nelle opere della letteratura universale. In Carlo Emilio Gadda, ad esempio. Le pagine e i pensieri di Gadda conoscono la storia e il dolore senza fine in essi dell'umano. Esse sanno che in ogni tragedia, e di tragedia la vita collettiva è costellata, «la bufera, prima che bufera di morte, è stata bufera di demenza»<sup>2</sup>. Anche per questo egli cerca, riuscendoci, di rimanere lucido sempre, in quel suo non imitabile coagulo di freddezza e di passione. Un coagulo, un nucleo estetico e teoretico che parte dal cuore di ogni cosa e a esso sempre torna, il tempo: «E il nome degli evi si farà inesorabile seppur lento consumatore dell'opere, forse già sorte [...] poiché il numero è lo schema del tempo»<sup>3</sup>. Il tempo è lo schema dello scrivere, del suo scaturire, del suo farsi lettura dopo anni, decenni, secoli, del suo rendere presente e vivo chi ha scritto come se fosse qui, accanto a noi.

La sezione *Temì II* del numero 34 riprende alcune delle tematiche dei numeri precedenti: le scienze, il classico. Crediamo che questo confermi come l'itinerario di questa rivista si ponga sotto un significato e un ordine dei quali la *scrittura* è segno, testimonianza, geroglifico. Il geroglifico della vita pensata e non soltanto sopportata.

*Vita pensata*

2 C.E. Gadda, *Il tempo e le opere. Saggi, note e divagazioni*, a cura di D. Isella, Adelphi, Milano 1982, p. 176.

3 Ivi, p. 15.

## THE CURSE OF THE SCRIPT On the tragedy of written culture

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There is a fascinating ambiguity in the very origins of writing. Most historians, linguists, cultural anthropologists and archeologists see it as a blessing, a major advancement in human civilization. While it is actually still a matter of dispute, when human beings began to write, it is common opinion that writing changed the course of history, and that the invention of the alphabet must be counted among the most notable steps forward in the lore of humanity<sup>1</sup>.

While presenting to my Uninsubria students in Global History the Phoenicians, I told them that those middlemen of the middle sea, those marauders of the Mediterranean, “invented the alphabet”, 22 letters that changed the turn of mankind history. They probably invented the alphabet, they used it probably extensively, but only very few testimonies of this use remain, and not very telling, at least if we wish to know more about how their civilization was constructed, and their society worked. While talking about the Phoenicians, I spoke also about another civilization – in occasional contact with the former – the Venetians, or “*Paoleoveneti*”, a name that might sound as “Phoenicians” misspelled, and mispronounced. The Venetians too had their own alphabet and written culture, albeit not so much is left of this, much less than what is left of the writings of the Phoenicians. Thus, two Mediterranean civilizations that made first use of the script, left very little in terms of written documents. Did they pay a divine penalty for their invention? Did they forget to create – and pay homage to – some sort of God of the scripture as it was the case with

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1 See e.g. W.M. Senner (ed.), *The Origins of Writing*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1989. Free access: <https://archive.org/details/originsofwriting0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up> (accessed March 2026). For a short introduction, A. Robinson, *Writing and Script. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2009. As for ideas similar to those exposed in this essay, see C. Weth, K. Juffermans (eds.), *The Tyranny of Writing. Ideologies of the Written Word*, London, Bloomsbury 2018. For a comprehensive, though entertaining unusual history of writing, see Vv. Aa., *The History of Writing. From Pictograms to Pixels*, DK, London 2026.

the Egyptians, who adored Thot, God of writing and letters? But, more cogently, did the invention of the script actually change the curse of mankind for good? Can we imagine and tell a different narrative?<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I will attempt to provide a different view. It is a sort of very hard task and can be seen as a strongly questionable idea, to wit, a provocative one. However, it might be conducive to some reflections of the present status of written culture. But also, this stance might lead to some reflections on the moral, ontological, political dimensions of writing and written culture, something that is not just part of Western culture, but has, since time immemorial, held, and still holds a global dimension. It all originates from the precarious status on written culture in 2026. While the Gutenberg book is slowly but inescapably fading away – turning into an object of the past that still survives, and will survive, as it happened to manuscripts after 1450 and the print revolution, probably for a long yet defined time, but that is no longer useful nor exclusive – we are more and more immersed in a culture that returns to the ancient dimensions of *orality*. We rely on the human voice, in podcasts, for instance, or the combination of voice and images in television and particularly on the web. We ideally do not need to “print out”, and we, more and more, assume that a podcast is potentially changeable, removable, alterable (even though there will be always an “*editio princeps*” of it), while the infinite number of voices on the web, on television, preserve a validity only for the time being, only for the news they tell minutes or hour or maximum a day after the events related to those news took effectively place. Why something was deemed as worth of being “written”, fixed (carved) on stones and other forms of materials, *for ever and ever*? To answer this question means to address the fundamental question of the relation between time and script, script and eternity. It is a question of paramount importance also for our civilization in the present time. Why does scripture matter? Why an ability that has been considered for a long time as blessing can be

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2 On the Phoenicians, writing and the origins of civilization, still brilliant and to be re-discovered the libertarian approach by I. Paterson, *The God in the Machine*, Putnam's, New York 1943, pp. 3-23, *passim*.

equally seen as a curse, and on good grounds?<sup>3</sup>

In the natural world, or, to put in a philosophical garb, in the “state of nature”, scripture is not present. What we naturally learn is to speak and to understand. This is something that is present in the world of nature, certainly almost all animals – as far as I know – have their own language, and maybe some plants too. This is all what they need to survive, and they have been surviving this way for millions of years. Mankind eventually introduced scripture. But, for a long time, sophisticated expressions of the human intellectual agency – some that sharply differentiates as from the animals – such as poetry, were possible without script, they were oral. Homer is a case in point, if we remain in our Western culture. There was a text, but it was written in the mind only. Orality, the oral tradition of poetry, has been alive for a long time in popular culture. This allows the poet to offer his/her interpretation, based on memory, but also on imagination and inventiveness, of every possible poem, that lives and survives only in his/her mind. Oral cultures, oral poetry, have a margin of freedom that is by far higher with respect to that held by cultures that rely exclusively on writing. The individual voice – unique for every human being as much as the traits of the visage – becomes the only source and means through which the original (but in fact non-existing, at least materially) text is uttered. So, it is preserved in two ways, both extremely related to freedom: the individual *voice*, and the individual *choice*. The choice that renders the uttered word in oral poetry, but not also poetry, different each time and according to each different speaker. A poem will never be the same, in oral poetry, under different aspects. We do read twice a single poem, to paraphrase Heraclitus.

In our written culture, we confer a great deal of liberty to our *understanding* of a text that is, however, absolutely deprived of freedom in itself, when it is written, be it carved on stones, or simply written on paper. Our culture is the culture of *interpretation*. 20<sup>th</sup>-century hermeneutics is the most complete, perfect system of interpretation, philosophically constructed. But the written text rises – has risen since long time – to the status of *divinity*. With an entire science, philology, that pro-

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3 Writing as “curse” is the object of E. Barrett Browning’s 1860 “A Curse of a Nation”, mainly, but not exclusively, against slavery.

vide adepts and priests to this disturbing, yet omnipresent and all-encompassing cult. The absolute cult of the God called “Written Word”. Is it a God, or a perverse Demon? Philology is the secular religion based on, and venerating, the Text as God. It is a wonderful discipline, in that there is something divine in it. To restore the letters (and thus the real meaning) of a text in its first draft echoes the dream of having God’s words as they were pronounced in front of us<sup>4</sup>.

This relation – between written text, eternity, and divinity – would be of course a subject for entire books, for it has a vast number of implications. As soon as it is clear that the written word is the most eternal material, for it can be not only forever reproduced, but forever kept in human memory and transmitted, poets pride themselves of having built, with their own work, a monument that is going to last in perpetuity, even more than those of marble, or bronze. To the poet who was possibly the greatest of the gilded age of Roman poetry, Horace, we owe the well-known verses (Hor. III-30):

Exegi monumentum aere perennius  
 regalique situ pyramidum altius,  
 quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens  
 possit diruere aut innumerabilis  
 annorum series et fuga temporum.  
 Non omnis moriar multaue pars mei  
 vitabit Libitinam...

In this famous ode, Horace compares his work to that of sculptors, architects, to the Pyramids – here we can surmise a hidden homage to the Egyptian God of Scripture – that will survive forever. So that “I will not entirely die”. The script thus becomes part of the individual, not organic, not even material, but light as a spirit and perennial like a soul

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4 On the different aspects of the relation between script and hermeneutics see most recently M. Terzaghi, *Il merito del linguaggio: scrittura e conoscenza*, Casagrande, Bellinzona 2006; on Gadamer and orality vs script, see G. Cambiano, «Oralità e scrittura nell’ermeneutica di Gadamer», in M. Gardini, G. Matteucci (eds.), *Gadamer. Bilanci e prospettive*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2004, pp. 97-113; see also L. Lavelle, *La parola e la scrittura*, Marsilio, Venezia 2004; M.M. Olivetti (ed.), *Religione, parola scrittura*, CEDAM, Padova 1992; L. Saviani, *Ermeneutica e scrittura. Saggi e conferenze*, Aliberti, Roma 2008.

in paradise. Written culture and the individual wish and aim to immortality are one. There is a great deal of *hybris* in this opening statement, “a monument more lasting than bronze”, but also an undeniable quota of truth. Humans – who are mortal – desire immortality, and they aim at leaving something not only bound to last forever for it is *written*, but also because is *good*: i.e., beautiful, true, appealing, elegant, full of dignity, universally appreciable. Is this true?<sup>5</sup>

Instead of answering this question, I would like to move to those that became immortal, without having written a single line. The fact that they did not write – as Horace on the contrary splendidly and abundantly did – did not prevent them to become the greatest figures in the history of mankind. Homer did not write anything (and maybe he even never existed). Socrates the same. Confucius too. Did Zoroaster himself write the *Gathas*? Maybe, maybe someone just turned black on white on paper his words. Oral teaching offers ample space for changes, does not include the lethal fixity of the script. Those who only speak, be they prophets, philosophers, poets, reserve for themselves the right to change opinions, and are possibly terrified that something they said might be written and therefore become forever inalterable, even if they change their minds. They do not adore Thot, they adore truth, but truth can vary, for humanity transforms itself continuously, and so does human thought and beliefs.

Therefore, there is something fascinating in those “masters” – including academics – that are reluctant to write. A spell is in written texts. It haunts the written texts with the stigma of unchangeability. There is something, for instance, terribly tragic in the history of the Decalogue, that’s to say, of the Ten Commandments. In the original Hebrew, they are “utterances”, תּוֹרַת־בְּרִיתָהּ תְּרַשָּׁע, “words”, did God write them down “with his own finger”, or was Moses who did that? Who was the one who “put on paper” or rather on stone the utterances for the first time? If this was God himself, well, God probably did so in order to make sure that the Jews would remember. Writing is aid to memory. But why should the Jews remember moral tenets (at least as for the moral section of the Commandments) if they are self-evident

5 On the power of writing and its “truth” see e.g. C. Nicolini Coen, *Il segno è l'uomo*, Durango, Andria 2020.

moral truths and relevant behaviors in human society?

If Moses did so, it was in order to establish his (disputed) supremacy on the people of Israel, to become absolute political leader, claiming that he had and has (the Tables of the Law as it is well known are written twice, for the first set went broken), a special, unique, relation with God? Why an entire people should be taught that they “should not kill”? Is that not self-evident? Or were they so wild a people that they indeed needed a written moral code? Were they in their infancy?<sup>6</sup>

Written culture is needed, possibly, to establish a complex human society and forms of governments different from those present, and positively so, in the state of nature. The invention of writing is great starting point for the emergence of political élites and political systems, normally highly structured. The same concept of “social contract” hints at this. Did it ever written down? Did people(s) actually ever sign one of them? The validity of a contract – in private law, the originator of every form of legislation, and the purest form of law – related to the fact that the contract is both written and signed. Oral agreements, “*la parola data*”, however, refer to a past or ideal society where “word” (and personal integrity, honor) had more value than the written texts. If we need something “written”, therefore, is either because we tend to forget, or because we are dishonest. This does not mean well for every sort of written text, a very large galaxy.

After all this discussion, it seems clear that even the Latin famous dictum, “*verba volant, scripta manent*”, takes up new meanings. It is a fascinating story, that related to this saying. If Caius Titus pronounced these words in a public formal talk during a session of the Roman Senate, he probably meant that one must be cautious when putting works in black and white. Tragically, what is put in black and white, “*nero su bianco*” is often doomed to live in perpetuity. Especially if transcribed several times. He, however, also said that it is better to write, as to have things established, fixed for sure. The second meaning of the dictum is possibly the most ancient and relevant to our discourse. Words, especially if

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6 This is relevant also for Jan Assmann’s Freudian re-interpretation of Moses, and the rise of the religions of the “book” against those of the “cult”. See J. Assmann, *La distinzione mosaica ovvero Il prezzo del monoteismo*, Adelphi, Milano 2011, and his other books.

“winged”, “*le parole alate*” can fly everywhere, from mouth to mouth, or even through the wind. Their immateriality is extremely powerful. They do not need a material basis, let alone a heavy one, marble or bronze. The power of the voice is extremely more effective than that of the script. In a way, the whole history not only of Western Civilization, but also of the entire world, can be seen has a fight between the script and the voice<sup>7</sup>.

Every document is also a monument. Not only, often, a gravestone. It is something dead that pretends often to talk to the livings, and to say things that are either lively, or held by the writers and readers alike to have a “life” in themselves.

A written document hints at a “gravity” that is mighty, terrifying. With the Reformation, the concept of “*sola scriptura*” that was meant to eliminate the class of priests who had become so powerful and spread in Catholicism, in a way reversed the original teaching of Christ, that was oral. Petrified, the doctrines of the Gospels were imposed upon crowds that paradoxically were mostly still illiterate. Before interpretation, they needed the ability to read. Which they mostly lacked. Luther translated the Bible. But to make it accessible to the Germans of that time the teaching of German was needed. The ability to read and write is much less necessary than that to hear/understand, and speak.

There is a quota of life, in orality, that goes lost in the lethal sedimentation of the written word. Actors that played on a “*canovaccio*”, a plot or draft or rough outline, ignored the slipknot of the written text. If scripture was invented as an aid to memory, it happened when humanity lost his mnemonic skills in a dramatic way, was already decadent, and needed such aid. We can remember very well also what we hear, not only what we read. On the contrary, the very fact the invention of writing can weaken our memory, for we know that we can always refer to the written text, something that eventually becomes our only reference point. Without the text, we are lost! This is the meaning of the famous passage in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which I quote here in full to conclude my essay:

7 Quite important the dispute between classical philologists Adam Parry and George Miller Calhoun on the “winged words” in Homer (ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα), personally, I endorse Parry’s views. The idea of “winged words” as sum of popular knowledge moral related to orality than to script, is present in the book *Geflügelte Worte. Der Zitatenschatz des deutschen Volkes*, published in 1864 by German philologists Georg Büchmann (1822-1884).

SOCRATES: I heard, then, that at Naucratis, in Egypt, was one of the ancient gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis, and the name of the god himself was Theuth. He was the one who invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice, and, most important of all, letters. Now the king of all Egypt at that time was the god Thamus, who lived in the great city of the upper region, which the Greeks call the Egyptian Thebes, and they call the god himself Ammon. To him came Theuth to show his inventions, saying that they ought to be imparted to the other Egyptians. But Thamus asked what use there was in each, and as Theuth enumerated their uses, expressed praise or blame, according as he approved or disapproved. The story goes that Thamus said many things to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts, which it would take too long to repeat; but when they came to the letters, “This invention, O king”, said Theuth, “will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered”. But Thamus replied: “Most ingenious Theuth one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are not part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise”<sup>8</sup>.

To learn to write and read has been considered since time immemorial a means of emancipation for mankind. This is true if there is a ruling élite that indeed command writing and reading and tyrannically rule over a majority of illiterates by dominating these “divine” skills and

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-275a. See the interpretation and translation by B. Suzanne, online: [https://plato-dialogues.org/tetra\\_4/phaedrus/plan\\_sp3.htm](https://plato-dialogues.org/tetra_4/phaedrus/plan_sp3.htm). (Access March 2026).

making every time laws with the charisma of the scripture. Literacy, derived from the gift God allegedly made to Moses on Mount Sinai, was a special gift that eventually turned into being the privilege of political, absolute power. First in theocracies, later on in most political regimes. The written culture is tricky. Theut was a magician that wanted to erect his own fortune, at the expense of others. Is it also sick?

Can we imagine a world of pure orality? A world not reduced, but restored to the status of sheer orality?

Maybe yes, we can. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* – the famous 1953 novel turned into an even more famous movie – can be thus read in a reverse mode. To burn all books is a way to liberate mankind from chains it brought with itself for millennia. There is an urge towards liberation in every attempt, failed or successful, to burn books. Even though historiography tends to stick to a traditional interpretation: only repressive, totalitarian regimes burn books. The Catholic Church ordered the Talmud and Bible to be burnt<sup>9</sup>. Nazis burn a quantity of “degenerated books”. Lorraine Boissoneault splendidly commented upon two books by book-burning expert Rebecca Knuth<sup>10</sup>.

Maybe one day a fully emancipated, perfect mankind will not need writing and reading anymore. The written culture has brought about freedom, according to the common notion, and emancipation. It is obviously true, in the sense that the tyrants who could use as weapon the script eventually found enemies able to use the very same weapon. But at what price? We are attached to the books in a way that shipwrecked fancy to save books from the shipwreck and carry them to the desert island where they are bound eventually to strand.

But do they really need them?

9 See G. Fragnito, *La Bibbia al rogo. La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti della Scrittura (1471-1605)*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2015.

10 See L. Boissoneault, «A brief history of book burning», *The Smithsonian*, 31 August 2017, online: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-book-burning-printing-press-internet-archives-180964697/> (Access March 2026).

## Abstract

In questo saggio cerco di offrire una visione diversa e plurale sulla positività della scrittura, solitamente data per scontata. La scrittura è uno strumento di libertà o, al contrario, un mezzo di oppressione utilizzato da diverse autorità nel corso della storia? Può essere considerata una maledizione, più che una benedizione? Abbiamo davvero ancora bisogno delle Sacre Scritture nell'era di internet e del ritorno all'oralità (attraverso podcast, ecc.)? La cultura scritta è probabilmente più vicina all'estinzione di quanto tendiamo a credere. Allo stesso tempo, è difficile immaginare un mondo o un universo privi di scrittura.

In this essay, I try to offer a nuanced view about the positivity of script, normally taken for granted. Is script an instrument of freedom, or rather, a way to oppress peoples used by various authorities in the course of history? Can script be seen as a curse, more than a blessing? Do we really still need scripture in the age of internet and return to orality (via podcasts, etc.?). The written culture must be closer to extinction more than we tend to think. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a world, or a universe, without writing.

## Parole chiave

cultura scritta, cultura testuale, filologia, oralità, scrittura, scrittura e potere  
philology, orality, script, text culture, writing and power, written culture

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«LA VITA COME MEZZO DELLA CONOSCENZA» - CON QUESTO PRINCIPIO NEL CUORE SI PUÒ NON SOLTANTO VALOROSAMENTE, MA PERFINO GIOIOSAMENTE VIVERE E GIOIOSAMENTE RIDERE

Friedrich Nietzsche, *La Gaia scienza*, aforisma 324



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