

What do we Mean by *Worldview*?

The Sense we give to our World

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1.1. Making Sense of Worldview

The 2006 Conference of the *International Association of Literary Semantics* held in October in Krakow, Poland, offered a charming and enchanting setting for debates upon the sense and nonsense inherent in language, literature and communication. As the autumnal haze and mist descended on the ancient Jagiellonian University, debates sprang up in the general forums and dispersed into the various study groups and workshops that explored questions in greater detail. Poland played its role as a truly Central European state, a meeting point for scholars who came from Canada, Britain and France to meet their counterparts from Germany, Poland and the Ukraine. What brought scholars together from different disciplines and different languages and what animated their discussions was a shared conviction that language and literature are inextricably bound up together. If their conviction is not misplaced, then it would seem natural to assume that the disciplines of literary studies and linguistics should by rights converge regularly to exchange views as each pursues its own goals. Is such a convergence possible on the question of sense and nonsense?

For linguists, the question of meaning can be approached from various angles. Two main questions which linguistics deals with are: 1. How are linguists to make sense of language? and, 2. How can the ways different languages make sense of the world be compared? From a literary perspective the question of meaning is posed in different terms. The questions that literary scholars or literary critics are likely to ask are: How do writers use language to explore the way they see the world? How does a writer's individual use of language help to unveil a new world for us? The different nature of these literary and linguistic approaches does not hide the fact that they are both concerned with one central question: How is the exploration of reality linked to language.

This question, though it might serve to unite literary scholars and linguists. Nevertheless, it already introduces one pitfall that must be avoided in any shared debate, namely; What do we mean by *language*? After all, it is one thing to discuss the language of Shakespeare as when we argue that his metaphors help give form to his world, or to argue that the rhythm of his verse and the energy of his syntax give vibrancy to that lively representation; it is another to argue that his language (English) has been transformed by his own literary contribution to the imagination of the English-speaking world. Which *language* are we speaking of? Are we speaking of the style or form of one writer's specific use of his native tongue, or that native tongue itself as a distinct and unique language system belonging to a linguistic community?

These are indeed essential questions for linguists and literary scholars, and it would be naïve and presumptuous to hope that one short article could hope to provide a satisfying response to them. Nevertheless, the necessity of establishing a common ground for debate among literary scholars and linguists cannot be overstated, and the potential for misunderstanding, talking at cross-purposes (and inventing meta-linguistic nonsense) should not be underestimated.

Since the fall from grace of Jakobson and structuralist poetics, linguistics and literary studies have all but confirmed their divorce. There have been some attempts at a rapprochement in recent decades (by the *Poetics and Linguistics Association*, *The International Association of Literary Semantics* and *Cognitive Poetics* in the States for example). Nevertheless, something of a cold war has been going on between the two disciplines, and relations between the two disciplines in a great many faculties from Prague to Paris have been tepid to say the least; hostility may be rare but indifference has been growing in the vacuum of debate.

This state of affairs has inevitably cut linguistics off from essential questions concerned with the individual nature of language use (such as, for example, the way man explores his world and how he experiences the world aesthetically). Literary scholars, for their part, in withdrawing from linguistics, have often contented themselves with rather rudimentary tools and terms when it comes to tackling language. On the whole, they prefer to speak of "words", for example, because other semantic or phonetic units of speech are difficult for them to grasp and master. Consequently, when it comes to tackling questions such as metre, syllable stress and rhythm they are often vague and imprecise to a degree which would be found unacceptable in other disciplines (such as music, singing or dancing, for example).

Surely there was something inevitable in this divorce. Philology held together the love of language and the love of literature, but increasingly over the twentieth century, philology became overshadowed by linguistics as a scientific project: and the trajectory of that project aimed at a rigour and precision which were not to be found within the framework of the humanities to which literary scholarship and philology belong. As philology cleaved

like an iceberg into one project animated by scientific aspirations and another anchored in the exploration of the personal experience of the world, the terminology and concepts developed by each of the two disciplines became increasingly incoherent for its counterpart. And anyone who dared to venture out into the middle ground risked taking a dip in the Baltic.

The present article aims to investigate and clarify one shared concept which might serve to both re-establish and nourish the debate between linguistics and literary scholarship, the concept of *worldview*. Curiously, this is a word which has escaped the effects of the divorce between linguistics and literary scholarship. *Worldview* remains a shared concept, a child which neither of the disciplines seems willing to give up. Not only is it widely used by both disciplines, the term has also come to gain wide usage in social and political debates. That is to say, the literary and linguistic usages of the term have helped stimulate reflection in a wide variety of non-specialist circles. A click on any internet search engine will testify to this fact. One recent *Google* search provided 278 000 links to texts concerned with Orwell and *worldview* (29/03/2007). 11 800 matches were found using the same search engine to find texts linking Kundera and *worldview* (idem.)

The texts quoted were often of an original (if not obscure) nature. *The Gay Patriot*, for example (a right-wing, homosexual American website) denounced what it called “the Orwellian worldview of Bush-haters” (www.gaypatriot.net/2006/04/06). In other articles, the term *worldview* was used by writers to criticise politicians, or to describe the world using writers’ perspectives as a short-hand to formulate their own opinions and impressions. In the same vein, the *Village Voice* website stressed that readers’ own worldviews are transformed by the books they read when one of its author’s spoke of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which he called “Kundera’s worldview-altering novel,” (www.villagevoice.com/30/03/07).

Of course, these non-specialist uses of the term are unlikely to satisfy linguists and literary scholars in search of rigorous definitions, but they do demonstrate the capacity of the term to generate or shape debate about the relationship between language, literature and the world.

1.2. A Literary Definition

The literary scholar will often make use of the term *worldview* to speak of an author’s vision of the universe, the way it works and the way it works upon the fates of individual men and women. In this usage, *worldview* represents a synthetic, overall position or viewpoint. This should not, of course, be confused with the viewpoints of his characters, represented by their words, thoughts or actions as they interact with other characters. A writer’s world is peopled by a group of thinking, feeling characters who all have their own perspectives and sensibilities which are revealed to the reader to a greater or lesser extent. The author may sympathise or empathise with one given character more than with others and thereby provoke a like sympathy or like empathy in the consciousness of the reader, but there always remains a distance between the *worldview* of the character and the *worldview* of the author. This can be seen in examples of irony, when the author and the reader share a superior sense of understanding of a situation (or a more lucid understanding of the character himself). In the *Bildungsroman*, for example, the character moves from youth and naiveté to adulthood and maturity. He takes on a moral stance, thereby proving himself worthy as a hero (and, consequently, worthy of the interest the author and the reader have accorded him through his less than perfect years). Pip and Tom Jones both discover the world and struggle to take their place in it. As we follow their steps, we see the world largely through their eyes in those famous novels by Dickens and Fielding. There is a superior view of those characters and their actions which is unveiled to us by the authorial voice, and it is by coming into harmony with that authorial *worldview* that the characters are raised up and transformed.

Dickens was an expert in representing the eccentric and perverted natures of men and women, catching telling glimpses of those natures in their habits and linguistic tics. Dickens’ characters (like the bores we meet in bars late in the afternoon) never tire of offering their views on life to anyone willing to listen to them. In *Oliver Twist*, Fagin, the exploiter of orphans, Sykes the woman-beating burglar and even Nancy, his prostitute girlfriend, all have philosophies of life, however, limited they may be. Fagin believes a man must look after number one without worrying about the fate of those he uses and abuses to achieve his ends. Sykes believes women were made to serve and obey men. And though he is very much a criminal (a moral outsider), there is a parallel between his sexual politics (based upon *might is right*) and the exploitative class system which he refuses to submit to in robbing the rich. Nancy believes that though life may be harsh and cruel, it consists in striving to be happy and finding some light in the darkness (a sad echo of *carpe diem*).

These worldviews of the underclass of nineteenth-century London are all clearly depicted in the characters’ words and actions. But there is an overall synthetic *worldview* which emerges from the juxtaposition of these individual worldviews and the conflict between the different characters. Each of their choices reveals something about Dickens’ own *worldview*. Though Dickens is supremely humane and often traces the tragic descent of essentially good characters into vice, he also clearly believes some people were born bad and are in effect utterly beyond all hope of salvation. Sykes will never repent. There is, therefore, a kind of poetic justice to be found in his fate when Dickens has Sykes hang himself from the rope that he sends Oliver up to tie around the rickety chimney during his flight from the police. This proves that Dickens endorses Christian values and

believes in the victory of good over evil. The fact that Nancy “betrays” her boyfriend in order to save Oliver, reveals that though she has learned from Fagin and Sykes to prostitute herself, she remains true to her sex (as Dickens understands it in his Christian worldview): nothing can kill her maternal instinct. Like most Christians, Dickens appears to believe that women are by nature meant to be mothers and that their desire to protect children will induce them to risk their own lives. Within the moral universe of such a worldview Nancy becomes a tragic heroine when she is beaten to death by Sykes after he discovers she has delivered Oliver into the hands of his adoptive father.

As these examples show, the word worldview has a different meaning when we are talking of characters and of authors. But this double meaning does not prevent the concept from being a useful one. Anyone who has read more than three or four novels by Dickens becomes familiar with his universe of colourful characters from the various classes of Victorian England. His is not the world of Hardy. Hardy’s pessimistic view of the disintegration of agrarian industrial Britain has an entirely different flavour. His scenes often take us back to an almost pre-industrial Britain, but his metaphysics are more modern. Man is alone and sad in Hardy’s world. Though Dickens’ characters traverse the most arduous ordeals and come into contact with perverts of a wide variety, they aspire towards goodness and happiness and Dickens invariably rewards each of his heroes with a paradise on earth, or the next best thing, a happy ending. Hardy’s world is one of a spiritual and erotic longing which invariably leads his characters through a complex maze of decisions and actions leading to an inescapable and ominous fate. Tess and Jude are only two of the most obvious examples.

What this shows, is that two writers of the same language can inhabit and create entirely different worlds, metaphysically, morally and aesthetically speaking. The same would appear to be true of writers of any language: Tolstoy’s world is not that of Dostoyevsky. The latter’s characters do not speak or feel with the same words and sentiments as those of the former. Though the two writers were contemporaries, their spiritual and moral questions were not of the same nature.

For the literary scholar, worldview is a question of sensitivity and understanding. All of the classical authors, Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and most of all Shakespeare, can teach us how to feel, give us the words to express our feelings, give us thoughts and perspectives to understand more fully our world, our relationships and ourselves. If literature is *culture* then it is the soul-food that nourishes the growing soul. Failing to reach out into the world of Dickens or Shakespeare would therefore imply a limitation of the soul’s capacity for developing its understanding. The potential of the soul could be said, consequently, to have been curtailed when it does not open up unto the worldview of a great writer.

This may seem to be a rather optimistic or idealistic view of the importance of literature, and many scholars in present-day literary theory may even find it “reactionary”, but the influence of literature on the popular imagination seems to bear out the importance of great writers. When the *Village Voice* referred to “Kundera’s worldview-altering novel,” the authors were referring to this very capacity of literature to nourish and cultivate the soul. On a more prosaic level, the spread of terms derived from Orwell’s book *Nineteen Eighty Four* testifies to the capacity of concepts from literature to carve the contours of debate on politics and society. Terms like *Big Brother* and *Newspeak* are endlessly bandied about in the media today, and the fact that they have taken flight from the book itself, and are now used by those who have not read it, only serves to underline the breadth of the writer’s influence. In discussions of government in the US (such as the one above), or of Blair in the everyday British media, references to Orwell and the worldview that *Nineteen Eighty Four* has engendered for the popular imagination are rife.

Indeed, the impact of his book has spread to some extent to discussions in other languages. References to Orwell and his worldview can be found in French in *Le Monde* (August 27, 2006), and Orwell is commonly referred to in intellectual circles in Germany and the Czech Republic. Though Orwell has been used by various factions to defend their interests against those of others, the fact that those factions fight to make him theirs testifies to the power of literature to shape the imagination. It shapes not only the political debate but, to some extent, the courses countries take as their debates take form using terms and concepts borrowed from literature.

1.3. A Linguistic Definition

The above definition (or definitions) of worldview are very different from those that have currency in current linguistic debates. For many linguists, each language constitutes a world for its own linguistic community. In recent decades, as languages have been dying out at a horrifically rapid rate, *ethnolinguistics* as a discipline (or a cause) has emerged to strive to draw attention to their disappearance. Linguists such as David Crystal (2000) in England, and Hagège (2000) in France have spoken out against the loss to the world of each worldview which vanishes with the language that dies. But what exactly is this *world* that is lost to *our world*? For Crystal (idem. 47) “World views are all-encompassing notions; so, to obtain a sense of what an indigenous world view is requires enormous commitment from an outsider – at the very least, sharing the life of the people to a degree, and taking on board the responsibilities which inevitably follow.” The worldview of a language is bound up in the myths and stories that give coherence to a community’s sense of its self, its world and its place within that world. But worldview cannot be reduced to stories:

One story does not make a world view. A world view gradually emerges through the accumulation of many sources from a community – its myths and legends, its accounts of traditions and practices, and a vast amount of cultural knowledge which is all too inadequately summed up by the single word ‘heritage’. (Crystal, idem. 46)

This does not imply that worldviews are simply quaintly intriguing world-perspectives of otherworldly communities. For Crystal, each culture expresses a different relationship with reality, a different knowledge of the world. Curiously, Crystal pitches his argument in pragmatically utilitarian terms: just as the colonial explorers of the Americas sought what was “useful” in other cultures, so Crystal encourages us to believe that those other worldviews have something to offer us in terms of real concrete knowledge. Speaking of other cultures, he claims:

It is so easy to underestimate the detailed nature of this knowledge. But all over the world, encounters with indigenous peoples bring to light a profound awareness of fauna and flora, rocks and soils, climatic cycles and their impact on the land, the interpretation of landscape, and the whole question of the balance of natural forces ([...] ‘ecology’), (Crystal, idem. 46-47).

Crystal does not seem interested in entering other worldviews to explore them for their own sakes. He is not advocating we adopt an alternative view. He is not so much an explorer as a justice-maker. His concern is primarily with the greater good of humanity as a whole and human culture as a project. He seems to envisage the possibility of a harmonious symphony of knowledge emerging from the synthesis of vastly different worldviews in an emerging global community which becomes increasingly aware of difference and sensitive to alterity.

Ethnolinguists such as Crystal and Hagège both elaborate their thought along the lines of ecological metaphors, which leads both of these authors to found arguments based upon concepts such as the necessity of diversity for “cross-fertilizing” languages. Are they simply allowing themselves to be seduced by their own emotive rhetoric? Though the influence of dozens of foreign languages upon any one language can be confirmed by simply skimming through a dictionary of etymology, it remains questionable as to whether cross-fertilization makes each and every language essential to the continuity of the others. Is Czech vital to Wolof’s existence? Hagège laments that the surging Prussian nation made German “the grave of the Slavic languages,” (*le tombeau des langues slaves*, Hagège, 2000, 80, my translation). But apart from Hagège, who today misses Polabian, (*le polabe*), a Slavic language that disappeared in the eighteenth-century? And did its demise prevent the flourishing of other languages of vastly different linguistic families? Did it even prevent the emergence of Slovak as a written language in the nineteenth century, or the literary revival of Czech with Erben and Mácha during that same period?

The validity of the arguments of ethnolinguists is not at stake here, however. For our discussion of the meaning (or meanings) of worldview, it would seem that for the linguist (if Crystal can be claimed to be representative of his discipline), one language constitutes one world view. This, however, stands at odds with what the literary scholar claims when he holds Dickens and Hardy and Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy have entirely different worldviews. Clearly we are dealing with two different concepts here: the worldview of a language, shared by all members of its linguistic community, and the worldview of an individual consciousness which takes root within, and in reaction to, the inherited words and concepts of a given language. The former worldview is over-arching and inescapable, the latter is individual in nature and probably infinite in number.

2.1. Worldview: The Fate of the Concept

Distinctions and definitions, if they are to be of any use, must enable us to amass a vast number of details and particularities under distinct headings. The terminological ideal remains the category, conceived as a container which includes and excludes. If the above opposition between a linguistic and a literary definition can be said to be useful, then it is so in that it allows us to distinguish two radically and fundamentally distinct (and to some extent irreconcilable) usages of the term, *worldview*. In recognising that distinction, the disciplines of literary scholarship and linguistics might hope to span the divide between their modes of research and their preoccupations, having first secured the foundations of each distinct definition. Just as the stability of the suspension bridge depends upon two sturdy towers firmly grounded on opposing banks, any exchange between disciplines depends upon a clear definition of what is to be linked together.

Yet, the engineering feat of bringing the two disciplines into one debate should not be underestimated. As we have already seen, worldview can have two meanings in literary scholarship (one for the author, the other for the character). On the other hand, as we shall see, in linguistics, things are even more complex. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that many linguists hold each language to represent a unique view of reality, an individual worldview. Linguists who subscribe to this view or who give accounts of it can, for the sake of argument, be arranged into six categories:

- linguists concerned with the specificities of individual languages in their research into comparative linguistics and philology,
- linguists who are concerned with the relationship between culture and language (Boas, Sapir, Whorf, Langham Brown, Lucy, Steiner, Dalby et al.),
- linguists who wish to generate awareness of the difference between the different worldviews inherent in each language and who militate for their protection in political debates (Crystal (2000) Romaine and Nettle in English, for example, and Hagège and Stamm in France among others),
- authors of linguistics textbooks who seek to spread knowledge generated by linguists such as the ones listed above (Salzmann, Auroux, Thomas, Wareing Singh, Stilwell Peccei, Thornborrow and Jones et al.),
- authors of encyclopaedias who either personally espouse the view that each language represents a world, or who give accounts of linguists who do so (Crystal (1997) in English or Dubois, Giacomo, Guespin, Chistine Mercellesi and Jean-Baptiste Mercellesi, Mével, Ducrot, Schaeffer et al. in French),
- translators whose daily activity requires them to negotiate the incommensurable categories and frameworks of different languages and whose reflection on their own practice offers valuable insight into the differences between languages and their worldviews.

Nevertheless, in addition to these groups, an almost endless list of writers make use of the term worldview when considering language and its relationship to ideas, culture and society. This more philosophical use of the term (which goes beyond the scope of the present article) has been discussed in detail by the Christian thinker, David K. Naugle, in his *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, published in the U.S. in 2002. Though disappointing in its account of the linguistic roots of the term, Naugle's book gives an invaluable overview of the course of the concept. He traces the term back to Kant and shows it has a prodigious destiny in nineteenth-century German philosophy before going on to have a great deal of influence on twentieth-century thought in both Europe and North America.

2.2. Do Linguists Like the Concept of Worldview?

Philosophically, culturally and sociologically speaking, worldview has multiple meanings. The diversity of stances that have been adopted using worldview as a key-pin concept is almost infinite, but this diversity cannot be contrasted with a single unified usage in linguistics. For, despite the list of linguists given above who share Crystal's view of the uniqueness of each language, it would be a gross error to assume that linguists were agreed upon the principle that each language constitutes a worldview.

On the contrary, much of modern linguistics has bracketed the question of worldview. Linguists have often proved indifferent to the different manners by which a language allows us to make sense of the world and speak to one another of our perception of that world and our relationship to it. At times this blinkered vision breaks into open hostility; diversity is not always welcome, even as a concept.

Moreover, there is perhaps something antithetic towards worldview inherent in much of the methodology of modern linguistics. Questions of perception and meaning have often been left to philosophy, while linguists have striven to define the formal categories of language. This can be seen at an intra-linguistic level in the study of syntax and phonology, just as it can be seen at an inter-linguistic level. Indeed the whole of the German nineteenth-century Indo-European project in which Bopp and the Grimm brothers were engaged was animated by a formalistic methodology. In order to discover the *Ursprache*, meaning was left to one side. Individual expression and perspective in language were ignored while the formal similarities and dissimilarities of language were contrasted in Indo-European languages in order to establish the "parentage" of modern and ancient tongues (see Trabant, 1992 and 1999).

In more recent times, Chomsky's project to establish a universal grammar, once more limited itself to form. Is the will towards unity and the quest for a single origin or universal principle incompatible with the discussion of diversity? Indo-European scholars (and Chomsky himself) were seeking such a common origin to language, a universal shared base. Is that why they steered clear of the concept of worldview, that relativistic concept which brings unity and universality into doubt (Trabant, 1992, 55-57)?

Cognitive Linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson, in reacting against Chomsky's formalism, have, it is true, tried to reintroduce the question of worldview into American linguistics (Lakoff, 1987, Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). But Lakoff himself admits that in doing so, he is rowing upstream. Worldview is understood in the US in terms of linguistic relativism and has, therefore, become tainted with negative connotations. American scholars associate it with deconstructionist rejections of truth and values. Among "responsible" scholars, relativism has been "identified with irresponsibility, fuzzy thinking, lack of rigor and even immorality," Lakoff argues (1987, 304). And it was for this very reason that he felt obliged to try to rehabilitate the term worldview.

But can Lakoff's stance be considered as a new door opening to allow discussion on worldview? In what has come to be called 'Second Generation Cognitive Linguistics' incarnated by Fauconnier and Turner, we have seen a return to universalism. Once more the question of language difference has been skipped over. And we are invited by the latter two authors to consider *The Way we Think* (the title of their joint work published in 2002) without giving any consideration to the ways different languages structure, frame or help shape that thought. (This is somewhat curious, given the fact that the authors do not share the same mother-tongue, Fauconnier being French and Turner being American). Rather than a new door opening, it seems that Chomsky has crept into Cognitive Linguistics by the back door. This is hardly surprising since most of the Cognitive Linguists writing today were brought up on a staple diet of Chomsky's generative linguistics which no doubt shaped the concepts they work with and their sensitivity to language as a whole.

This does not discredit the work of Fauconnier or Turner, of course. Their investigation of creative use of language remains penetrating, but in investigating the personal use of language, discussion remains restricted to English, which we are asked to accept in the stead of *language*, the universal category, the framework of thought. The comparison of different worldviews emerging within different linguistic systems remains a question which cannot be approached using their paradigm, and it must, therefore, be concluded that their approach is implicitly hostile to the question of worldview as it is posed in linguistic circles.

What is the result of this hostility or indifference to worldview? Mainstream linguistics has largely ignored or steered clear of the question of worldview. Although many linguists may at times pay lip-service to the belief that each language is a unique framework for understanding the world, those linguists who work to uncover or analyse the different manners by which languages unfold the world to our understanding belong, on the whole, to minorities rather than to the mainstream schools that have emerged in nineteenth and twentieth century linguistics.

And yet, for the great linguists, the question of worldview returns like a ghost to haunt those who seek to understand language with the concepts the linguistic tradition has bequeathed them. Within the context of his period, Saussure felt bound to consider the question of worldview. Saussure rejects as "illusion" the naïve belief that there is a relationship between race and language, but he introduces the concept of *ethnisme* by which he means "a unity reposing upon multiple relations concerning religion, civilisation, and common defence etc," (une unité reposant sur des rapports multiples de religion, de civilisation, de défense commune, etc.: Saussure, 305, my translation). There was, he argued, a certain reciprocal relationship between this *ethnisme* and language (*langue*). Consequently, he argued, "the social bond tends to create a linguistic community and perhaps prints upon the common idiom certain characteristics," (le lien social tend à créer la communauté de la langue et imprime peut-être à l'idiome commun certains caractères, *ibid.*).

Saussure was willing to admit that a language's character or individual élan ("genie") tended to send it again and again along "certain predestined routes," (certaines voies déterminées, Saussure, 317). He, furthermore, accepted that among linguists of his time, it was a commonly held opinion that a language reflected the psychological character of its nation (310). But, being concerned principally with the functioning of language as a system, not with languages, and being the inheritor of almost a hundred years of Indo-European scholarship, Saussure's main concern was not with the analysis of different worldviews.

Besides, his most original contribution to the question was formal in nature. For example, in his analysis of the composite words derived from the verb in German, he argued that words such as *Bethaus* (bed-house) could be explained as concepts originally linked by a (*betahūs*) in which the *a* had been effaced by Germanic peoples who thereby modified a mode of thought inherited by their ancestors (Saussure, 311). For Saussure, this proved that linguistic change could not be explained simply in terms of the psychology of nations and the way a people thinks. On the contrary, he argued, this modification took place "outside of the mind, in the sphere of sound mutation which would soon impose an inescapable yoke upon thinking and force it to enter into the special route opened up to it by the material state of signs," (hors de l'esprit, dans la sphère des mutations de sons, qui bientôt imposent un joug absolu à la pensée et la forcent à entrer dans la voie spéciale qui lui est ouverte par l'état matériel des signes, *ibid.*). This comes close to linguistic determinism, but neither the influence of the formal patterning of language upon the mind nor the psychology of nations were questions taken up by the twentieth-century linguists who claim to be the inheritors of Saussure.

Another great linguist for whom the role between thought and language was a fundamental and inescapable concern was Emile Benveniste. Criticising the naïve (but resolutely resistant) opposition between language and thought he affirmed: "thought is reduced if not precisely to nothing at all, then at any rate to something so vague and undifferentiated that we have no means of apprehending it as a "content" distinct from the form that language confers to it," (la pensée se réduit sinon exactement à rien, en tout cas à quelque chose de si vague et de si indifférencié que nous n'avons aucun moyen de l'appréhender comme "contenu" distinct de la forme que la langue lui confère, Benveniste, 1966, 64, my translation). In contrast to many of the ethnolinguists, Benveniste was not content with theorising about the relationship between thought and language. He argued we must enter into a concrete historical situation in order to scrutinise the categories of a given mode of thought in a given language (*idem.* 65). This makes a crucial difference: it transforms the debate on the relationship between

language and thought into a debate on the relationship between men using languages in order to give form to their thoughts.

But while translators and philologists (and Benveniste himself) certainly try to come to terms with the relationship between speaking a language in a specific way in order to formulate one's thoughts, Benveniste's call for concrete analysis of discourse contrasts with the sparse consideration modern and contemporary linguistics has given to the way different languages form different worldviews. In fact, apart from some notable examples (Sapir, Whorf, Lucy et al.) in the list of the six groups of linguists who work with the concept of worldview, few of the authors propose definitions which will allow distinctions to be drawn in terms of worldviews. Curiously, the definitions are invariably alike in being reductive and repetitive and the authors invariably quote the same sources (and very often the same quotations).

2.3. A Reductive Definition

Despite the proliferation of the word itself, debate on worldview in linguistics encyclopaedias has tended to focus on two American linguists, Edward Sapir and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and the quotes that are offered to characterise what has become known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" are somewhat predictable. In his encyclopaedia, David Crystal himself admits that the lines he cites from Whorf are "much-quoted":

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf, quoted by Crystal, 1997, 15)

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is quoted once more by Singh in *Language, Thought and Representation*, though the quotation given of Whorf's thought, "[...] every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others [...]," (Singh, 25) is itself quoted from Grumperz and Levinson. The same quote emerges, translated into French, in Sylvain Auroux's *La Philosophie du langage* (170). The authors of the *Dictionnaire de linguistique et des sciences du langage* published in 1994 (Dubois, Giacomo, Marcellesi and Marscellesi and Mével) invert the names in the hypothesis (Whorf-Sapir) and opt for paraphrase, but the key phrases are there (511) to remind us of Sapir's much-quoted phrase: "The worlds within which different societies live, are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached," (Sapir, quoted by Lucy, 22), a quotation that is found once more in Auroux (169) and in Kirsten Malmkjær's *The Linguistics Encyclopedia* (308).

In fairness to these encyclopaedias, Crystal (15) and Auroux (170-171) do make a clear distinction between two forms of the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis"; linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism. Whorf at times falls into the former kind of hypothesis, seeming to posit languages as frameworks from which the mind can only escape by reaching into another language. Linguistic relativism, which Crystal calls "a weaker version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" (Crystal, *ibid.*), is defined by him in the following terms: "Language may not determine the way we think, but it does influence the way we perceive and remember, and it affects the ease with which we perform mental tasks," (*ibid.*). He claims this hypothesis is generally accepted. And he defines his own position on the question when he says: "The thinking which seems to involve language [...] is the reasoned thinking which takes place as we work out problems, tell stories, plan strategies, and so on. It has been called 'rational', 'directed', 'logical' or 'propositional' thinking,'" (*idem.* 14).

It would be unfair to take the entries in encyclopaedia for the last word in linguistic thought. Specialists of Whorf's work, such as John A. Lucy exist, and make it therefore pointless to reproduce a more accurate picture of his contribution to linguistic thought. But encyclopaedias do allow us to test the water and weigh up the impression we have of discussions on worldview in specialist circles, in linguistic literature and in on-line publications. Countless experiences confirm the impression that the confused definition of the concept of worldview is in part the result of a series of questionable practices which have become almost standard procedure:

1. Whorf and Sapir are lumped together without any clear distinction being made concerning their thought, their research or their methodologies,
2. neither of the thinkers is quoted at any great length and the frequent repetition of standard quotes seems to imply they are derived from second-hand sources,
3. both Sapir and Whorf are lumped together in the Boas-Sapir-Whorf trinity, but Boas' work is invariably not quoted nor is his project defined,

4. many writers (Crystal, Auroux et al.) quote Wilhelm von Humboldt to be the primary instigator of what has grown into the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the worldview debate, but Humboldt (to my knowledge) is never quoted by such authors.

The result is that thought on worldview has tended to divide itself into two camps. In one camp, the thought of Whorf and Sapir has been mixed up and set up as a straw man: language is characterised as an uncompromising, deterministic, thought-controlling prison house. And such it is predictably easy to knock down. In the other camp, stand the defenders of difference, extolling alterity, convinced that each linguistic system can open up a new reality to us. In its worst form (as in the work of Stamm) no serious effort is made to defend the claim that each language is a world (or to master the languages which are celebrated). But even in its most enlightened form (Crystal and Hagège, for example), debate has often lacked clearly-articulated linguistic evidence of the incommensurable difference between language systems.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the work of Boas, Sapir, and Whorf which others have already provided (see Lucy). But we might be forgiven for making some cursory distinctions here. Boas' aim was to make the Amerindian culture a worthy object of study for American anthropology. Since he held that culture and language were inseparable, he was led to reflect on the way language embodies culture. Whorf was the most radical of the three authors, and, at times, went as far as suggesting that English was inferior to Amerindian languages such as Hopi which, in his opinion, "showed a higher plane of thinking, a more rational analysis of situations..." (85). This was no doubt meant as a provocation intended to generate awareness of the different sensitivity expressed by a non English-speaking linguistic community, but all it succeeded in doing was inverting the racist linguistics characterised by the German nineteenth-century linguist, Schleicher, without escaping the value-based paradigm of that tradition.

Sapir is certainly read and quoted much less than Whorf, and though a recent Google search (08/04/2007) linking *Sapir* and *worldview*, came up with more than 18,700 entries, of the first one hundred, only eleven of them were concerned with Sapir's own work while the other eighty-nine referred to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This is regrettable, since the scope of Sapir's work is remarkable. One of the fundamental differences between Sapir and Whorf is that the former was interested in literature and individual speech. His work on individual identity and personality in language might have allowed scholars to bridge the gap between linguistics and literary scholarship. Whorf's work, on the other hand, centres upon language systems, and, in analysing their grammatical forms, he tends to steer us clear of individual representations of reality. This cuts us off from the question of the role man plays in a language's evolution, a question that remained central for Sapir. It would seem then that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will not go away. But it haunts us as a spirit, intangible and empty, lacking the soul and substance of the two writers to whom it is attributed.

The real ghost in the worldview debate, however, is Humboldt. Who was this phantom that persists in haunting the entries of encyclopaedias? And is he worth digging up to have a look at what he has to say about language?

3.1. Humboldt's Thought on Language

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) is remembered as much as the Prussian politician and diplomat who served in Vienna and London, and who transformed the university system of his country, as he is for his philosophy of language. He spent two years in Paris in the decade following the French revolution and served his country in negotiations with Napoleon during the Franco-Prussian wars. His thought on language was shaped by a life-time spent in different countries and was crystallised by the time he spent in Paris and in the Bask region. While much linguistics has abandoned philosophical questions and while few modern or contemporary philosophers can claim to have more than a partial grasp of linguistics, Humboldt straddles the two disciplines: or rather, he belongs to a period in which the separation of thought and language would have seemed absurd. In this, he is more the soul-mate of Locke and Leibniz than he is akin to Wittgenstein or Heidegger.

Set along side the latter two, Humboldt makes them seem pedestrian by virtue not only of his vast empirical knowledge of language but also the rigour with which he orders that knowledge and brings it to bear in showing how language-study can help us to understand the living, perceiving, speaking, thinking man. This language knowledge embraced not only formal grammar but also morphology. What interests Humboldt is the way form allows us to generate concepts and arrange ideas in set adoptable and adaptable patterns. While Whorf claimed, "The very essence of linguistics is the quest for meaning" (Whorf, 79), Humboldt strove to understand what he called the "work of the spirit" (Humboldt, 1999, 49), in German, "arbeit des Geistes," (2003, 315).

Though Humboldt believed that word-formation was "the deepest and most mysterious aspect of all languages" (1999, 94), by which the mind was coupled to concepts by virtue of language, it was not the end or the goal of linguistics. "The break-up into words and rules is only a dead makeshift of scientific analysis," he asserted, (idem. 49). He did not say this dismissively; he himself engaged in the study of the way languages harness and assemble and concepts into words and phrases. But he argued that his was merely the means by which the linguist could hope to penetrate into the inner workings of language. And for Humboldt a language

works. Scientific investigation constantly reduces language to the status of an object, an object of study. But Humboldt was concerned with speech (*Sprache*), and that brought him back, time and time again, to discourse (as Benveniste would argue more than a hundred years later, that all language study should).

In his representation of the dynamic working of language as an activity (*Energeia*) rather than a product (*Ergon*, 2003, 315), Humboldt can be contrasted to the ethnolinguists. Crystal and Hagège time and time again stress the living nature of language, waxing into a lyrical organicism, as if to compensate for the tireless reification of language practiced by linguists who feel forced to make it into an object for scientific observation. Humboldt, in contrast, never loses sight of one fundamental fact. Language does not live; speakers do. If language lives, it only lives within us and in encountering it we are only ever confronted with the expression of living, breathing speakers, or the written traces of those speakers.

To be sure, language, regarded in its real nature, is permanent and enduring (*beständig*) in Humboldt's view, but at any single instant it is also a transitory thing (*Vorübergehendes*, *ibid.*). This makes describing language a particularly difficult task. It is pointless to try to establish the unchanging structure of a language since language is ever-changing. Though much of our grammar appears inflexible and constant to us, of course, it is only so in that speakers and writers maintain its constant form by formulating their ideas along conventional lines. And this view entails two consequences: firstly, man is put back at the centre of language, conceived of as a system that is ceaselessly reproduced in living speech: and secondly, it opens up a sphere for creative speech. Sapir was sensitive to the inalienably personal aspect of language, Whorf was not.

For this reason, when speaking of form in terms of speech and thought patterns, Sapir spoke of "grooves" (Sapir 1949, 15) where Whorf spoke of "ruts" (Whorf, 138). While Whorf dreamt of escaping from English into a radically different worldview, conceiving such an escape in terms of an exotic adventure, Sapir and Humboldt both held language itself to be a creative space in which man *creates* himself and his relations with others. It is worth noting here that Sapir was a poet and that Humboldt had spent part of the 1790s writing a book on Goethe's novel *Hermann und Dorothea*.

Humboldt believed that human genius created, transformed and maintained language, and could at times revive it. But Humboldt was a pre-romantic, and was not dazzled by the romantic ideal of transcendental individual genius. Genius for Humboldt was part of man and part of language. Great writers like Shakespeare and Goethe contributed to the refinement of a language and deepened its potential for expressing experience, emotion and ideas, but these outstanding authors were not rebelling against language but rather cultivating something implicit within its nature, something to which language owes its origin and something which is manifest in its unfolding destiny. Writers strike their roots into reality, and the linguistic community reawakens to the vibrant potential of language for creative expression.

Humboldt was concerned with the way the individual adopted and adapted the worldview of his language. Since he believed each language possessed its own character, its own worldview, the vocation of the linguist became the uncovering and the comparison of these different worldviews as they manifest themselves in a fleeting and fragmentary form in individual expression. The linguist became an anthropologist, which goes some way to explaining our reluctance to exclude Boas from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Worldview in Humboldt's thought was a concept which was concerned with both man in his individual right, and with the linguistic system in which and with which he thought. Worldview could not be conceived of as a prison as it is sometimes described. In fairness to Whorf, he himself spoke not of prisons but of the way the individual "builds the house of his consciousness" (252), but a man's worldview (or what he at other times called his "thought-world") was invariably conceived of by him in terms of walls or limits (hence the fantasy of escape). For Whorf the "thought world" is the microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm," (Whorf, 147). But this implies that the internalised framework of "habitual thought", paradoxically confines the man who thinks and speaks within any given linguistic community.

This is precisely the definition of worldview which poses a problem for literary scholars who see almost infinite scope for writers to invent new worlds within any given linguistic system (a view Humboldt would have embraced). Philosophers, sociologists and culture critics would have similar misgivings about Whorf's model of worldview. Many linguists, however, are also sensitive to the fact that different worldviews seem to exist within a given language and indeed often compete with one another. Singh, in her chapter on "Language, Thought and Representation" in *Language, Society and Power*, speaking of the influence of ideology upon language, makes what seems to be a fairly straightforward unchallengeable statement: "One language: many worlds." This openness to diversity is, of course, welcome. But does it help us define (i.e. limit) the scope of our definition, as we must define it if worldview is to become a useful concept?

In our tour of worldview, we have already entered into confusion in various areas, encountering different definitions both in different disciplines and within the same discipline. Does Humboldt have a solution? If we are in search of simple solutions to complex questions, then the answer is a disappointing, "No." If, on the other hand, we are interested in clarifying a complex question and carving the contours of the subtle and deep

conception of language that Humboldt unfolds for us, then we might be more patient with the definition he gives of worldview.

Crystal is right to claim that Humboldt is the origin of the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.” This is ironic though since Crystal probably has in mind the fact that Whorf uses the term *Weltanschauung* when he speaks of worldview (58). *Weltanschauung* is certainly a key concept for Humboldt, but he did not coin it. As Naugle argues (58), the term is derived from Kant who introduced it in his *Critique of Judgement* published in 1790. In his usage, *Weltanschauung* is best rendered in English as ‘intuition of the world’. Kant used it in the following context:

If the human mind is nonetheless to *be able even to think* the given infinite without contradiction, it must have within itself a power that is super-sensible, whose idea of the noumenon cannot be intuited but can yet be regarded as the substrate underlying what is mere appearance, namely, our intuition of the world [*Weltanschauung*]. (Kant, translated by Werner S. Pluhar and quoted by Naugle, 58-9)

Was Whorf a reader of Kant? It seems more likely that Whorf inherited *Weltanschauung* from Sapir and Boas (who were both German-born), and it is unlikely that he had read Humboldt (or read him closely). Because the terms worldview or “thought world” which Whorf uses as interchangeable terms for *Weltanschauung* do not correspond to Humboldt’s own definition.

3.2. Humboldt’s Dual Worldview-Definition

Whorf’s concept of worldview corresponds to the twin-term coined by Humboldt in his dual definition of worldview, the term *Weltansicht*. In Humboldt’s work, this concept denotes the language system which offers up to the speaking subject a means of interpreting and expressing the world in which he finds himself. The *Weltansicht* represents what might be called the *form* of language, but in Humboldt’s usage of the word, *die Form* signifies the established patterns of expression as they have come to gain a degree of permanence thanks to conventional usage. Form represents the patterns *worked out* by the *work of the mind*. Languages are formed by the struggle of speaking subjects to express their thoughts. Form is ‘the living creation of the mind’ (Humboldt, 1999, 148). “Language arises [Humboldt argues] in much the same way that, in physical nature, one crystal builds up upon another,” (ibid.).

In this process, Humboldt believed there took place an entwining of mind and language. This makes language not a superior extra-human artefact that acts upon thought and individuality. On the contrary, language can only come into being through the encounter of individual mind and already established speech. Language is always an encounter between man and man, whether in conversation or in reading or writing.

In place of the causal view of language which makes language the servant of the master (as in language use), and in place of the inversion of this model in which man is *at the mercy of language*, Humboldt appears to posit something of a dynamically interactive, spiralling union between man and words. Nevertheless, languages do have, in Humboldt’s philosophy, an inner character (*innerer Character*, 2003, 411). This inner character dwells within the language “like a soul” (ibid.) and this soul, this character, makes its influence felt by us as we begin to master the language and think within it.

Humboldt is probably thinking here of the way we experience the tug of a foreign language which guides us into an unfamiliar mode of reflection once we begin to feel at ease within it. This experience simply makes us aware of a process which is implicit in all languages. The *Weltansicht* guides us along the grooves of familiar speech, and familiar patterns of thought.

What is essential in this model of worldview is that, even at its most ingrained and established level, *Weltansicht* remains the creation of mankind, which is ceaselessly being reproduced and modified. Rather than the fixed impersonal model, we are confronted with a living oeuvre, a work which *works upon* us but which can be *reworked*, remodelled. Even at its most fundamental level, the ‘rules’ of a language can be transgressed, modified or discarded.

To take a prosaic example, we can find many dialects of English which refuse to accept the interdiction to use certain verbs in the present simple. To smoke may be continuous or simple; I can say “I smoke, but I am not smoking now.” To want, is generally not accepted in its continuous form (since it invariably refers to a state and is therefore used in the present simple form). However, both the Geordie dialect and many Scottish dialects employ the verb “to want” in the present continuous form as in, “Will ye be wantin’ a bath?”

In a recent marketing campaign, MacDonald’s capitalised on the rebellious capacity of speech to break its own rules in order to attract young people who the marketing directors obviously supposed would approve of the misuse of grammar. They used the verb ‘to love’ in the continuous form (“I’m lovin’ it!”). At all levels of language, morphology, syntax, tenses and collocations, the modes of thought that language opens up for us can be modified.

And yet, however much scope for innovation the *Weltansicht* opens up for us, we cannot express ourselves without first entering into the language system. It is obvious that we cannot speak of concepts and

ideas without words, of course; but even objects do not, in Humboldt's opinion, exist for us in and of themselves outside of the sphere of language. This is not to say that objects have no real existence. I do not need a concept of a hammer to feel pain if hit with one and I don't need the word 'hammer' to feel fear when I see one descending to thump me on the head. But learning about what hammers are and what they are for takes place within speech. Our language offers up for us ready-made logical categories by which I can distinguish between a shovel and a spade, between a whale and a shark. In this sense, it is language which allows me to appropriate the things of the world, take them into my own consciousness and formulate my thoughts using them.

Jürgen Trabant has stressed the necessity of distinguishing between this view of worldview which language makes possible for us, and *Weltanschauung* (Trabant, 1999, 56). In Humboldt's thought, the *Weltanschauung* is the conception we have of the world. It is the conception that develops through thought and reflection but most of all through dialogue and discussion. My *Weltanschauung* is my semi-conscious set of ideals and fundamental ideas by which I construct and interpret my world, contrasting it with the perceptions and perspectives of those people with whom I live, work and converse. As such, it is legitimate to associate *Weltanschauung* with ideology (as indeed philosophers have tended to do).

In his commentary of his own translation of key works of Humboldt, the French writer, Denis Thouard argues (182) that *Weltanschauung* is sufficiently clearly defined as meaning man's intimate need to produce language in order to develop his intellectual forces and to realise a conception of the world, a process which requires the clarification of his own thoughts in his speech with others. *Weltansicht*, on the other hand, refers to man's first contact with the reality of the world, a visual or sensory contact. *Weltansicht* therefore precedes the forming of a *Weltanschauung*. As Trabant puts it (Trabant, 1999, 56), *Weltansicht* does not interpret the world: it enables man to form a concept of the world by furnishing him with a prior linguistic comprehension of the world.

Whether we stand with Crystal and Hagege in advocating the protection of worldviews, or with literary scholars and philosophers who evaluate the contribution of an individual writer to culture and understanding depends upon whether we understand worldview (as in the first case) to mean *Weltansicht*, or (in the second), *Weltanschauung*. Humboldt would have felt that choosing between the two leads us into a dead-end street. If Linguistics is a highway, then it should lead us towards a more refined conception of the way the latter form of worldview is constantly acting upon, invigorating and carving anew the former form of worldview, the language system that lives within us.

Conclusion

The history of the world is the history of forgetting as much as it is the history of remembering. Words echo down through the centuries acquiring new meanings and connotations while shedding others. For this reason, George Steiner claimed reading resembled translation in that we are forced to interpret the meaning words had for authors writing hundreds of years ago. Steiner himself made a brave attempt to introduce Humboldt into English thought in his book on translation, *After Babel* (relying principally on Langham Brown's excellent, if short, introductory work). To reformulate Steiner's ideas in Humboldt's terms, we might say that the living language system which inhabited past writers was fleeting and transient and that some of their meaning has become lost to us, just as those writers, if we could meet them, would find it impossible to tune into the vibrant resonance of our own language as its connections and constructions reverberate within us today.

So how are we to make sense of the term worldview? The distinction between *Weltansicht* and *Weltanschauung* exists (to my knowledge) nowhere in English thought outside of the works of Humboldt scholars (Langham Brown, Losonsky, Heath et al.). As Thouard knew, the distinction does not exist in French either. Consequently, '*vision du monde*' has followed the same obscure course as 'worldview' in English in causing thinkers and linguists to confuse individual conceptions of reality with the influence of the language system on thought and expression. It was to help French readers escape this confusion that Thouard stressed the distinction between *Weltansicht* and *Weltanschauung* in the glossary to his translation of Humboldt's works (Thouard, in Humboldt 2000, 180-182).

In Czech, the term used to translate worldview is "*obraz světa*" (world picture) which has the disadvantage of evoking Wittgenstein's "*Weltbild*". The term used by Poles is "*światopogląd*", which appears to signify "view of the world" or "world-perspective". Of the languages considered during our lively discussion at the Jagiellonian University, only Italian appeared to employ two terms on a regular basis ("*visone del mondo*" and "*ottica mondiale*"). Spanish, in contrast, tends to employ a single term, "*vision del mundo*," (Paz, 28).

In all these languages, a confusion remains between the perspectives that writers mould using language, and the language systems that are supposed to mould the thought of linguistic communities. The proximity, indeed the inseparable nature, of the concerns of linguists and literary scholars has done little to bring them together to clarify these central concepts.

Perhaps that is why it has been left to contemplative poets and musing essayists such as Octavio Paz to strive to bridge the gap between literature and linguistics by considering the question of worldview. Paz followed what for us is the traditional path in quoting Whorf, but, ironically, he chastised Mexican scholars for not

following up on Whorf's stimulating insights into Nahuatl (idem. 35). It seems in the worldview debate forgetting, indifference and ignorance are as often as not *de rigueur*. Paz tries to make up for this by giving Whorf a fair introduction to Hispanic readers. But it is more the spirit of Paz's inquiring speculative mind that is noteworthy. Perhaps it was because he was a multilingual poet both at ease at moving into other languages and cultures, and because he was by profession an inventor of worldviews, that Paz, like Sapir (and most of all like Humboldt) was capable of spanning the growing divide that has cursed literary scholarship and linguistics, rendering each of those disciplines ever more sterile the more they consolidate their divorce.

If worldview as a concept will not go away, it is perhaps because it is an essential concept, one that reminds us that language and literature are two inseparable facets of one greater question: the way we make sense of our world for ourselves and for others in our speech, in our writing and in our reading. Rediscovering Humboldt might well provoke a small earthquake in linguistics in English-speaking countries. His conception of language and the character of languages forces us to harness philosophy, linguistics and literary scholarship once more together. The dual definition of worldview he provides does not seem to exist in other languages and it seems to have been forgotten in German. The dominant tradition has imposed a philosophical meaning upon *Weltanschauung*, making it a synonym for ideology or belief system. At any rate, if Humboldt's distinction has any resonance for the debate today, that seems to suggest that it was because his was a living thought which reminds us as linguists, philosophers, literary scholars (or simply as men and women) of the way we live in language.

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