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Études de Stylistique Anglaise

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Marie-Pierre Maechling

- 1 This work aims to introduce the reader to the very first “stories” written by Susan Glaspell when she was a journalist for the *Des Moines Daily News*, the largest daily in the state of Iowa in the early 1900s. Like many writers, Glaspell came to journalism as a kind of apprenticeship for writing; she was sure she could find inspiration for further writing there and she was right: in 1901 she covered her first murder trial – The Hossack case –, and in 1916 and 1917 she wrote her two masterpieces, the play entitled *Trifles* and the short story she adapted from it “A Jury of her Peers”, which were directly inspired by the case.
- 2 Margaret Hossack was charged for the murder of her husband, a tough and insensitive farmer who had been found dead in their bed, his head severely mutilated with an axe. She said she had heard nothing though she was in bed next to him. Soon there were claims that she had been unhappy and wished her husband dead. Whether she really did it or not was never proved as there were no eyewitnesses and only circumstantial evidence. But she was found guilty by the jurors, a jury of 12 men, all farmers, in other words “a jury of her husband’s peers” (Bryan & Wolf 2005, 120). A second trial took place two years later, in a more neutral place, and the jury could not reach a verdict. The case was dismissed “not because of the innocence of the defendant, but because it [was] impossible to secure her conviction” (Bryan & Wolf 2005, 231).
- 3 Susan Glaspell wrote 26 articles about the Hossack case, and was the only female journalist to attend the trial and investigate the crime scene. While the first article she wrote in December 1900 was short (only two paragraphs) and very factual, the later ones were much more sensational and designed to hook the reader on the case; unanswered questions, sensational details, and rhetorical work on language were typical characteristics of her articles. They were also far from objective, and Glaspell really shaped the public’s opinions; first she was tough on Margaret Hossack, but according to Bryan and Wolf (2005), after her visit to the crime scene in mid-December 1900 her bias changed, and she began to empathize with this woman whose tough

existence had clearly struck Glaspell, a pioneer-to-be in feminist drama. Jones (1980) says that, at that time, women murderers were not an exception and were taken very seriously by males trying to detect them. According to the then crime sciences, these "fiends" were most likely to be found among "sensual women" (Jones 1980, 113). In popular literature as well, fictional accounts of women murderers were successful. But some early feminists had already spotted marriage as a potential cause for women's distress, "regular" women who were no fiends but hopeless human beings.

- 4 The article under study is entitled "Her Dreary Easter Day" and stages Margaret Hossack waiting for the verdict in her cell while people outside enjoy a sunny Easter day. It stands as an exception among the other articles written during the trial that began on Monday, April 1st, 1901 and ended on Wednesday, April 10th, 1901:
 - It deals with Easter Sunday, which is the only day when the trial was temporarily suspended.
 - It was published on Tuesday, April 9th, that is to say two days after the events it reports, whereas all the other articles were published the day after or even the same day as the events they report.
 - It appeared on page 3 when the other articles were on page 1, probably because it does not deal with recent events.
 - Finally, its lyricism, form and content are much different from all the other articles on the trial.
- 5 The exceptional nature of Glaspell's article will first be highlighted in terms of generic form, through a comparison with another article she published on the same day, on page one. Then the notion of exception will be examined with respect to the construction of the text itself, thus appearing as the cornerstone of the painting of Mrs Hossack's tragic condition, a dramatized heroine waiting for the impending verdict.

A generic exception

- 6 To talk about newspaper articles is to talk about genre. As any kind of discourse, it is shaped according to conventional rules that allow the reader to identify it as a genre and to read it properly. Van Dijk (1986) identifies the schematic structure of news reports which he calls "News Schemata":

Fig. 1. Superstructure Schema of News Discourse (from Van Dijk 1986, 169)



- 7 These superstructures "order textual sequences of sentences, and assign specific functions to such sequences" (Van Dijk 1986, 156). There are two supra items here, "Summary" and "News Story". First comes the "Summary", with "Headline" and

"Lead". The Headline is typographically but also stylistically marked as it often displays incomplete sentences. It signals "what is the most relevant or the most important information of the news report. Cognitively, therefore, it is the information in the headline that monitors the further processes of reading and comprehension" (161). The Lead "features the fuller expression of the thematic structure of the news report" (161) and "must express the major semantic categories of a news event: Who, What, Where, When, How and so on" (162). It can also be the introduction of the news report. Then in the body of the news report, or "News story" in the diagram, "Main Event", "Background" and "Consequences" form an "Episode", which Van Dijk defines as "the core of a news story" (167). There should be at least a "Main Event" category which "organizes all information about the recent events that gave rise to a news report" (162). There the recency principle applies as the main event should be the more recent one. Then some "Background", past and present, should be given. The next category is called "Consequences" and includes verbal reactions. Finally there is the "Comments" category, which is not obligatory: "Expectations imply references to future events, whereas Evaluation explicitly features evaluative expressions" (167).

- 8 If we parse Glaspell's articles on the Hossack case, they all follow this macrostructural schema. During the trial they are devoted to a thorough day-to-day report of what happened in court. Their titles hook the reader with either the main event ("Testify for Mrs. Hossack" April 6, 1901, "Arguing the Hossack Case" April 8, 1901), a scoop ("Experts Say It Is Human Blood" April 4, 1901) or a dramatic announcement ("Looks Bad for Mrs. Hossack" April 5, 1901, "Mrs. Hossack's Fearful Ordeal" April 10, 1901), and subtitles summarize the articles in a systematically elliptical style ("Professor Tilton and Dr. Grimes on the Stand - Grewsome Exhibits In Evidence", "Tries to Show Secret Enemy Doped The Dog and Murdered the Farmer-Prosecution Confident"). Then recent events are told, along with some background and comments at the end of the article.
- 9 As an example, and as a basis for comparison with "Her Dreary Easter Day", it is interesting to take Glaspell's article dated April 9th (same day as the article under study) entitled "Allege Haines was murderer" that was published on the front page (continuing page 6) a few hours after defence attorney Senator Berry made his final appeal to the jury:

Fig. 2: from *Des Moines Daily News*, April 9th 1901, (<http://www.midnightassassin.com/glaspell.html>)

ALLEGE HAINES WAS MURDERER

STARTLING POSITION OF ATTORNEY IN HOSSACK CASE.

Senator Berry Says Insane Man is Guilty - Hundreds in Tears - Conviction Predicted.

- 10 We can identify the summary category, with different headlines: the most important recent information (that senator Berry tried to name another culprit, a neighbour and friend of the victim who is in hospital for insanity) written in elliptical style, then in lower case a summary of the whole article: "Senator Berry Says Insane Man is Guilty - Hundreds in Tears - Conviction Predicted". A real hook dramatizing the whole story with three tantalizing words (insane/tears/conviction), it first takes up the main event, then quotes an apparently moving fact - why do hundreds cry? The reader should read on if s/he wants to know - and ends up with the conclusion of a predictable conviction when just a few words before, the attorney was said to offer another culprit. Here the journalist readily implies that this argument is not to be taken seriously by the jury, and implicitly comments and evaluates the main event.
- 11 The first paragraph of this article gives the WHERE (Indianola), WHAT (the defence's final argument), WHO (Senator Berry) and HOW (exhausting himself); this "HOW" evaluates Senator Berry's performance with much lyricism and hyperbole:
- At times the jury without an exception was moved to tears. Strong men who had not shed a tear in years sat in their seats mopping their eyes and compressing their lips in a vain effort to suppress the emotion caused by the senator's eloquent plea.
- 12 Glaspell used in her report as much eloquence as Senator Berry did in his appeal.
- 13 Then comes the main event in the second paragraph (Haines as a new culprit) followed by context, evaluation and expectations, and some interspersed moving descriptions of the assembly and the protagonists; although this is not an exception in her articles, the proportion given to it here is larger than before due to the imminent end of the proceedings and the special form of a final appeal, the most dramatic moment in a trial. The end of the article is devoted to background and former episodes.
- 14 Let us now examine "Her Dreary Easter Day", which was also published on April 9, 1901 on the third page of the newspaper. The headline already stands out:

Fig. 3: from *Des Moines Daily News*, April 9th 1901 (<http://www.midnightassassin.com/glaspell.html>)

HER DREARY EASTER DAY

MARGARET HOSSACK SAW NOT THE SUNSHINE NOR BIRDS

Residents of Indianola

Promenaded Past Her Cell

and Stared at the Lonely Woman.

- 15 After a noun phrase not naming the defendant explicitly, the headline shows two complete sentences announcing the topics of negation, privation, and isolation that will recur in the report. This full syntax is totally unusual at this stage. There do not seem to be any new events that triggered the article, though the two sentences do report facts with action verbs. The headlines do not even really summarize the article, which deals with the atmosphere "of tragedy" around the case and the victim, raising the burning question "is she guilty?".
- 16 If we now consider the core of this eleven-paragraph article, there are basically three parts or movements– and this parting in itself does not match the schemata of a news report:
1. The first seven highly rhetorical paragraphs establish the "atmosphere of tragedy" around Mrs. Hossack locked up in jail while people outside enjoy a sunny day;
 2. The following three paragraphs revolve around the question of people's opinions on the case;
 3. The last paragraph gives background on what happened during the first week of the trial; let us remember that this article, though it was published on Tuesday 9th, deals with events that occurred two days before; it does not allude to what happened on Monday 8th when the trial resumed.
- 17 It is true that the first paragraph can be said to be a lead, in that it does summarize and introduce the article: WHO and WHERE: the people of Indianola, WHEN: Easter Sunday, WHAT: the spirit of tragedy and the questions: "is she guilty, will they convict her?"
- 18 However, the article does not seem to feature a main event or indeed any other categories from Van Dijk's schemata until the very last paragraph of the article, where some background concerning the verdict is given, along with an evaluation. This

article, which shows a real bias in favor of Margaret Hossack, is not aimed at informing readers; it has several other functions. First it hooks the reader on the case – it is dealt with on page 1, 3, and 6 (out of 8) – when the verdict is to come two days after. Repetition acts as a “forget-me-not” technique. The Hossack case is a “serial”, many episodes forming a macro-narrative¹ that is about to reach its resolution; suspense is at its peak and the article is designed to feed the general excitement². It acts as a counterpart to the article on page 1 that is centred on facts and less on speculation; “Her Dreary Easter Day” does not hinge upon anything factual: it repeats the question “is she guilty?” and hints that people sympathize with the defendant, as Glaspell does. It is clearly not plot-advancing but acts as “catalysis” (Barthes 1977 quoted in Baroni 2016, 4)³.

- 19 Then, the question “is she guilty?” takes on a political tone in the second movement of the article as Glaspell interrogates the power of the “thirteen jurors”⁴ responsible for the “public verdict”:

Were it possible to obtain a consensus of opinion representing the entire community it might present Mrs. Hossack as an innocent woman, but that which can be gathered does not do so. That she has the sympathy of many people is certain; why, unless it be because she is a woman? When asked to express an opinion as to her guilt they refuse.

It is possible the general condemnation of the woman is due to the few who talk it so insistently. Perhaps it is these thirteenth (sic) jurors who are responsible for the public verdict.

- 20 Glaspell hints at people’s “sympathy” for Margaret Hossack twice in the article, but in the three paragraphs of the second part on public opinion, she slightly changes her approach; she first alludes to the “public excitement” and the “buzzing of human voices”, a liking for sensationalism which she paradoxically feeds but seems to denounce here. Then her mention of the “few who talk it so insistently” and of the jurors represents a political stance as she hints that the jury’s verdict might not be representative of the opinion of the multitude: “when asked to express an opinion as to her guilt they refuse”. Their silent voices are rhematized here and end the paragraph on a polemical tone. According to Jouve (2017), Glaspell is here “endorsing the role of the pamphleteer” (28) and pondering on “the legitimacy of the American legal system” (29).
- 21 Thirdly, this article therefore participates in the construction of Mrs. Hossack as a poor and silent victim, as the heroine of this on-going narrative, and uses many rhetorical techniques to do so. One of the most striking here is the use of the notion of exception in the building of her tragic condition.

The rhetoric of exception

- 22 The very first words of the first paragraph indicate that exception is a leading topic – or a hook – in this article: “Seldom, if ever, have the people of Indianola seen such an Easter Sabbath as Sunday”. The thematization of the notion shows that this is what is going to be discussed here.
- 23 The whole article is built around the notion of contrast and uses a binary principle: the people outside (a linguistic block or category (“residents of Indianola”; “the people of Indianola”, “all classes”, “the multitude”, “the entire community”), or a large number

("a throng of gaily dressed people", "many people")) vs Mrs. Hossack in her cell. The contrast is hinted at in the headline when she is alluded to in capital letters with pejorative or negative items ("dreary", NOT or "lonely") while the people outside are linked with meliorative terms such as "promenade".

24 This opposition runs in the first seven paragraphs (out of eleven). First, the introduction sets an agreeable Easter Sunday blended with "the spirit of tragedy":

(1) Seldom, if ever, have the people of Indianola seen such an Easter Sabbath as Sunday. It was not so much the beauty of the day, for, although it began and finished with ideal Easter conditions, there has been many another as balmy, as full of the freshening vigor of spring. There were other elements at work than those of external nature; other influences beside those arising from the deep significance of the day. **Blended with it was the spirit of tragedy, and it penetrated and permeated** all classes and found vent in the intensity with which the questions: "Is she guilty?" "Will they convict her?" were asked. (my emphasis)

25 After the thematization ("blended with it") allowing both cohesion with what comes before, and rhematization of the notion of tragedy, this powerful statement is followed by a hammering paronomasia ("penetrated and permeated") that announces all the rhetorical work in the article. This "atmosphere of tragedy" is dealt with in the first five paragraphs.

26 Then, paragraph 2 introduces Mrs. Hossack and her tragic condition, thus giving the cause of such a mood in the town:

(2) It was the atmosphere of tragedy surrounding Mrs. Hossack who, shut in from the world in a narrow, padded cell in the gloomy interior of the county jail, listening throughout the day to the inspiring changing of church bells or catching the half lost strains of chanting choirs, which even heavy walls and iron-gated windows could not entirely exclude.

27 From paragraph 2 onwards, a huge semantic field of meliorative statements on the day, including light, colours, sounds, perfumes, temperatures, and merry behaviour systematically opposes the conditions around Mrs. Hossack ("shut in from the world in a narrow, padded cell in the gloomy interior of the county jail") who appears to be denied all the rights of her senses: hearing in paragraph 2 ("listening"), sight in paragraph 3 ("eyes"), smell in paragraph 4 ("perfume"), touch in paragraph 5 ("enjoy the warmth").

28 This opposition hinges upon the simple adversative BUT that repeatedly introduces final pejorative statements on Mrs. Hossack:

(3) Spring had come and with it, as if by magic within a day, many an emerald spot, fresh and vigorous with the new life of summer, shown brilliantly against the sober brown, where winter yet reigns. **But** they were not for the eye of Mrs. Hossack.

(4) In churches great banks of delicately colored flowers buried pulpits and adjacent aisles and exhaled upon the air a perfume that will linger in the vaulted roofs and shadowy pews until another Easter shall come. **But** they were not there for Mrs. Hossack to enjoy.

(5) On the streets, especially those most remote from the jail, a throng of gaily dressed people enjoyed the warmth of an ideal Easter. Then they were merry; they laughed and chatted and walked; they talked and jested, **but** less as they approached the jail, until, when parading beneath its grated windows, a hush would fall upon them. (emphases mine)

29 Paragraphs 3 and 4 follow the same pattern: the first part stages a very bright and romantic portrait of the day in a long sentence using axiological and/or affective lexemes (magic, brilliantly, great) and non-canonical structures. Then comes a full stop

and the adversative BUT that introduces an anaphora "they were not", isolating Mrs. Hossack in her unfortunate condition, denying her the right to see or to smell.

- 30 Paragraph 5 is somewhat different. It echoes paragraph 4 as it uses the same thematization on place (in churches/on the streets) and axiological lexemes (gaily/warmth/ideal). After the remarkable use of a polysyndeton to stress how merry people are ("laughed and chatted and walked"; "talked and jested") the adversative BUT marks a change in their behaviour, from laugh to silence. The very last words "a hush would fall on them" suggest for the first time not opposition but similitude with Mrs. Hossack, and thanks to this final statement, Glaspell reintroduces in paragraphs 6 and 7 the notion of public opinion/sympathy for Mrs. Hossack "invisible to the multitude", and the tantalizing question already introduced in the first paragraph "is she guilty"? Thus after having subjectively portrayed Mrs. Hossack as a poor lone woman in her cell, she now turns to the question of her guilt. Paragraphs 6 and 7 are thus pivotal parts before the end of the article and draw a line between the notion of sympathy for the defendant and her potential guilt:

(6) Was there something fascinating in those walls that they could so suddenly silence the gay interchanges of the day, or was it for the woman within, for Mrs. Hossack, invisible to the multitude, that they felt a sympathy, which no evidence could entirely destroy?

(7) But about and beyond the jail, far enough away that it might not be heard within there was that buzzing of human voices which always accompanies public excitement, and in it could be heard that question which lingers on the lips of everybody here: "Is she guilty?" and the answer is lost in the discord, **but** the discord has an ugly sound.

- 31 Paragraph 6 ends the lyric tone and asks a question. Yet this question is not "is she guilty?", but "why are people so interested in the case?"; it is an alternative question but somehow a rhetorical alternative question, for Glaspell strongly suggests that it is because of Mrs. Hossack herself, whether she be a murderess or not.
- 32 Paragraph 7 resumes thematizing the place (note the alliteration on the prepositions), using rhematization on the question "is she guilty", and using the adversative BUT. It is a part of an anadiplosis ("the answer is lost in the discord, but discord has an ugly sound") and suggests an ominous ending. This recalls the headline on page 1 "conviction predicted", a thread Glaspell constantly uses to hook her readers. While showing her bias with the pejorative axiological adjective "ugly", which hints she fears Hossack's conviction, she feeds the public's excitement and the buzzing of voices she mentions in her article. The break with the following paragraph is quite telling in this respect:

(8) Mrs. Hossack spent the day quietly. Other members of the family attended one of the churches during the morning and some of them visited the jail in the afternoon. They are remaining in town during the trial, perhaps they will never go back to the farm again. Wherever they went yesterday they were pointed out; they had become curiosities; they awaken speculation, and following each came those questions: "Is she guilty?" and "Will they convict her?"

- 33 This paragraph is extremely factual for the most part and announces a focus back on the case. There does not seem to be any link or coherence with what comes before, but opposition is still present. There is an implicit reference to the quietness of the defendant not realizing that she might already be condemned by public opinion; this could be felt as tragic irony. The end of the paragraph repeats the questions "is she

guilty/will they convict her" for the third and last time, and these questions are rhematized with a subject verb inversion.

- 34 From that point on, and up to the coming end of the article, Glaspell plays on the mystery of the verdict, and makes use of modality (were it possible/ might/ is it possible/ perhaps/ certain/ difficult), making suggestions that do not have answers mainly to stimulate the readers' minds with ominous scenarios, and implicitly to make them ponder on the jury's responsibility. The very last paragraph, which we identified earlier as "background", is very different from the rest of the article and matches the typical news report in that it uses the typical vocabulary of a trial report (defence/ evidence/prosecution/testimony/ witness for the defence/jurors) that was absent from the rest of the article. It evaluates the position of prosecution and defence so far, thus showing the uncertainty of the verdict. It also gives background to and cohesion with the article on page 1 that reports the fight between prosecution and defence in their final appeals. It inevitably recalls the sub headline 'conviction predicted' that readers could find on the front page.

Conclusion

- 35 "Her Dreary Easter Day" stands out as an exception in terms of form and content.
- 36 If we look at it from the news report genre perspective, it is difficult to find the typical elements identified by Van Dijk. There does not seem to be any recent event that triggered the writing of it, nor was it published the same day as the events it reports, contrary to all the other articles during the trial. Moreover, the syntax and content of the headline is quite unusual, showing full sentences and no summary of the article.
- 37 If we now consider all Glaspell's articles as an on-going story forming a whole narrative, this article could be considered as an exception because it represents a pause; it is not plot-advancing and only designed to further hook the reader on the case. It raises the question "is she guilty?", a question everybody answers though in reality they cannot, a "void" to be filled a day later, when the trial ends.
- 38 Its content also stands as an exception; although we have just said it is "only" designed to hook the reader on the case, it is in fact half of the story. It is also meant to feature Mrs. Hossack, its protagonist, as a sympathetic and pitiable character. Glaspell, who herself sympathized with the defendant and maybe already realized that her case would be judged by men who could not or would not properly judge her, chose to make her character stand out via the notion of exception: we showed that the first movement of the article systematically opposes her to the rest of the people in Indianola thanks to some simple repetitive devices, an isolation announced in the headline. Then Glaspell's tone changes from lyric to polemical: she takes a political stance when she suggests that the jurors might not be representative of the public's opinion. In doing so, she stages Margaret Hossack as a victim of the legal system.
- 39 This article is unique in displaying so much lyricism and in being so distant from the news report genre. Glaspell wrote three more articles after it ("Mrs. Hossack's Fearful Ordeal" April 10, 1901, staging Mrs. Hossack in front of the jury for the last time; "Mrs. Hossack a Murderess" April 11, 1901, giving the verdict; "Mrs. Hossack's Parting Plea" April 19, 1901 telling of her arrival at Anamosa penitentiary), and this represents the

end of her story⁵, as she would quit journalism soon after in order to focus on writing fiction.

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NOTES

1. The articles on the trial – as well as on the case as a whole – form a whole set of episodes that could be analysed in terms of narrative structure. The mere titles themselves form a story. "Her Dreary Easter Day" comes before step 4 (resolution) in Adam's 1992 program for narratives; "Mrs. Hossack a Murderess" April 11, 1901 is what can be called resolution and "Mrs. Hossack's Parting Plea" April 19, 1901 the final state of things, though it ends with the statement "It is universally believed at Indianola that if Mrs. Hossack did not murder her husband she knows who did", suggesting the real murderer might still be free.

2. "Dans toute affaire 'feuilletonnée' par la presse, il s'agit de dynamiser une durée qui risque de devenir monocorde. Il s'agit de répartir judicieusement des moments de tension, des moments de détente, de suggérer des incertitudes dynamiques, de faire germer des hypothèses. Bref, dramatiser, mettre en intrigue" (Marion 1993 quoted in Baroni 2016, 9).

3. Baroni (2016, 4) explains his use of the term "catalysis" as follows: « Il ne fait guère avancer l'intrigue mais excite l'attente du lecteur en soulignant les lacunes de l'histoire qui attendent d'être comblées ».

4. Glaspell seems to have been mistaken here, as there were only 12 jurors. See Bryan and Wolf (2015, 119), and Jouve (2017, 28).
5. The Hossack case was not over though, as it would come back to court two years later.

ABSTRACTS

This work focuses on "Her Dreary Easter Day", a newspaper article that was published on April 9th, 1901 in the *Des Moines Daily News* and written by American writer Susan Glaspell, famous for her masterpieces *Trifles* (1916) and 'A Jury of her Peers' (1917). Glaspell wrote several articles — each one representing a new episode in the on-going Hossack case. Within what could be qualified as a kind of macro-narrative, the article under study stands out in terms of form and content: its generic structure does not match the traditional news report; it was published two days after the events it reports and has obviously a different aim from the other articles on the trial, namely victimizing the defendant and interrogating the legitimacy of the jury's verdict. The journalist's opinion and her sympathy for the defendant really stand out in this article, and exception is one of the cornerstones in the text.

Ce travail se propose d'étudier "Her Dreary Easter Day", un article de presse publié dans le *Des Moines Daily News* du 9 avril 1901, et écrit par Susan Glaspell, célèbre dramaturge américain du début du XX^e siècle connue notamment pour sa pièce *Trifles* (1916), et son adaptation en nouvelle "A Jury of her Peers" (1917). Parmi les autres articles du même auteur sur ce fait divers au long cours, dont on pourrait dire qu'il relève du feuilleton médiatique, l'article écrit durant la période du procès de Margaret Hossack se distingue de tous les autres de par sa forme et son contenu : il ne correspond pas à la structure générique de l'article d'information, a été publié deux jours après les événements qu'il relate, et revêt manifestement une autre fonction que les autres articles du procès, entre victimisation de l'accusée et pamphlet sur la justice américaine. L'opinion de la journaliste et son empathie pour l'accusée se font jour, et le thème de l'exception joue un grand rôle dans la conception de l'article.

INDEX

Keywords: Glaspell (Susan), news report, *Des Moines Daily News*, genre, exception, stylistics

Mots-clés: Glaspell (Susan), articles de presse, *Des Moines Daily News*, genre, exception, stylistique

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