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On the Clinical Picture of Nostalgia —and a Remote Literature

When speaking of nostalgia, it is Odysseus who comes to mind. Allegedly, he is the first great nostalgic, fated to press his return against insurmountable resistance. Later (after Ovid, after Cicero) the *Divine Comedy* speaks of the hour "that turns back desire in the sailors, and softens their hearts" (Dante 1978: 189). Homesickness, as it is known to the ancient and pre-modern world – a deep longing for that which is lost –, is fundamentally a spiritual orientation. It is primarily an emotional state. But sometimes, the metaphors pertaining to the body seem to presage the path of homesickness through the history of discourse. While Odysseus' nostalgia is soothed by the smoke of Ithaca, transient and incorporeal, for Dante it is the heart of the sailor which seems to put homesickness into not just the material, but even the somatic realm. No longer a vague yearning, no scattered signs in the distant heavens, but an organ whose fibres and pulse are inscribed with emotion.

"Homesickness" first appeared as a medical term at the end of the 17th century. It describes an illness characterized by the sufferer's uninterrupted thoughts of his native land, in addition to various other symptoms. The inventor of this new disease is Johannes Hofer, who wrote the *Dissertatio medica De Nostalgia, Oder Heimwehe*, composed in Latin and published in Basel in 1688. In this study, the ambitious medical student and eventual city doctor and burgomaster of Mulhouse takes up – with an unmistakable claim to originality – a "new subject", an illness described by no doctor before him. In Swiss dialect, this new sickness was known as "Heim-Weh", "home pain", in France as "mal du pays", but the humanistically learned Hofer coins the term *nostalgia*. He goes on to give a comprehensive description of the malady's characteristic signs:

The symptoms indicating the presence of the disease vary, and consist particularly in a lasting sadness, incessant thoughts of the native land, restless sleep or lingering wakefulness, a decline in strength, decreased sensations of hunger and thirst, feelings of anxiety or even intense heart palpitations, frequent

sweats, and a mental lethargy able to muster an interest in almost nothing beyond thoughts of home: such people are then susceptible to various illnesses. For example, they may suffer from persistent fever or febrile attacks, often quite serious, if the longing of the victim cannot be assuaged. (Hofer 1745: 14, translation: M.O.)

However, as nostalgia is not – or not yet – a temporally, but a spatially backward-directed yearning, it also appears curable, namely through a return to the familiar ways of life. This is demonstrated by three case studies of patients who spent time abroad, fell victim to the disease, and found relief only through a return to their homeland. One of Hofer's case studies examines a young student of Berne who falls ill in Basel and becomes feverish and panicked. Severe symptoms ensued, and his death was expected. Ordered by the treating doctor to administer a clyster, the apothecary recognized the man's condition, diagnosed it as homesickness, and insisted that the only cure would be a return to his native city. The student's constitution improved day by day; he recovered fully on his journey, and arrived hale and hearty in Berne. Another case concerned a young girl taken to hospital with an injury, who responded to all questions and treatment attempts with the words: "I want to go home, I want to go home." Home again, she recovered in only a few days, entirely without further treatment.

Thus, the pathologization of homesickness takes place in the context of a new medical knowledge of nostalgia as a complex of symptoms. In the light of the long historical insistence of this concept, it seems appropriate to characterize Johannes Hofer as what Foucault calls a "founder of discourse" within the framework of the humanities (Foucault, 1997: 87). For my purposes, however – interested as I am in the narrative of sickness, in homesickness in literature – it is of much greater significance that Hofer's text makes almost no references to scientific authorities dating back to ancient times. Instead, he employs case studies to support his conclusions. The case study, however, is not simply a way of empirically demonstrating his thesis; it must itself be seen as a story which makes accessible a new knowledge. For the complex of nostalgia as pathology can only be understood through narration, a strategy which celebrates its final triumph in the written reports of medicine, clinical psychiatry, or law in the 18th

and especially 19th centuries. One need only think of Irma, of the Wolf Man, of Little Hans and his fear of horses, each an account which first makes it possible to even understand what a neurosis or psychosis is, figures which are as much a part of world literature as many a character from fiction.

In this way, by becoming a tale, the student from Berne and the girl in her hospital bed provide an insight into Hofer's novel concept of homesickness, particularly when this girl says nothing more than "I want to go home". This stereotyped utterance, the unending repetition of the same few words, denotes two things: She does not merely speak of a desire, but also fulfils it, the constant repetition constituting a so called "ritornell" in the sense used by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1997: 424). For this ritornello creates a sense of home in a strange and frightening land. However, it has this function only for the person intoning it; for those outside, it remains simply a senseless compulsion. It is for this reason that the case study is necessary, the invention of a story in which the ritornello is embedded, and through which it also acquires meaning: In a very modern way, Johannes Hofer seems to have understood that the phrase "I want to go home" is meaningless unless a person speaks it as part of a story. It is this aspect in particular that transforms illness into the subject of literature: the barrenness of the event, its intelligible core, demand narration.

Just like Hofer's pathologization stands at the beginning of the medical concept of nostalgia, the further development is marked by its *criminalization.* Hofer's thesis circulated within the discursive landscape of the 18th century. And by doing so, it influenced and affected not only matters medical, but entered the spheres of anthropology, philosophy, literature, and law. Identified as the carrier of a pathological condition, the deviation of the nostalgic suddenly intrudes on his legal status.

This is particularly noticeable in one text, which stands on the threshold between homesickness as illness and homesickness which – until the present day – is primarily a question of psychological depression. The text in question is the doctoral dissertation by Karl Jaspers, composed in 1909 and published under the somewhat Dostoyevskyan title *Homesickness and Crime*. The thesis opens with

an apparent contradiction (one which will give rise to a literary topos): “Great interest has long been shown in those crimes (murder and arson) carried out with unbelievable barbarity and heedless brutality by delicate creatures, young and docile girls still in their childhood.” (Jaspers, 1996: 29) Drawing on medical and forensic sources, Jaspers presents and analyzes cases in which girls from poor village families in Switzerland are sent to work as maids or household servants in distant towns and hamlets. There, they fall ill with homesickness, and – in order to be sent home – set fire to the farmstead on which they work, suffocate or drown the infant with which they are entrusted, and so on. The novelty and modernity of Jaspers’s description of homesickness is its displacement of that ailment into the realm of the psychological illnesses, for which the body is only a medium. Nostalgia consists no longer of sweating and a lack of appetite, but concerns the psyche, which uses the body as a surface for the inscription of symptoms. Thus, if Hofer is the discoverer of nostalgia as a physical disease, it is Jaspers who puts an end to this model with his shift to the psychosomatic.

For a long time thereafter, the understanding of homesickness is firmly characterized by two constants, its classification in the realm of medicine and in that of social deviance. In illuminating the literary treatment of nostalgia, then, it is necessary to first follow the traces it left there as a syndrome and then as a source of criminal acts. The question to be answered is this: Where in Greek literature does homesickness appear in the terms of pathology, and where can it be identified as the cause of (legal or moral) transgressions?

As I have already said, the transition from medical to literary history is facilitated by the fact that the sciences themselves have already adopted the narrative as a way to make their theses comprehensible. The literarization of knowledge is inherent in the text of the case study; literature is the medium of knowledge *in all discourses*. Homesickness must be narrated in order to be thought. In this long-established literarization of homesickness, and also in its adaptation as a literary topic, we find located the point of contact at which the history of discourse and that of literature make a connection. If I have thus far focused on the germ of narrative in the sciences, I will now examine the marks left by the sciences in

literary prose in order to highlight the historical and cultural contextuality behind the texts.

Homesickness is no stranger to Greek literature. As part of a long popular tradition, it constitutes a phenomenon that has in many forms made its way into epics, poetry, and song. However, in neither Homer nor popular tradition does nostalgia appear in the sense of a sickness, recognizable by a stereotypical inventory of symptoms. The focus is rather on the poetic bond between the Earth and sorrowing Man. Thus, when, from the 19th century onward, homesickness appears as a physical malady in Modern Greek texts, this marks a discursive "import". This import, however, does not necessarily result from the direct influence of European literature. Rather, it implies something like an "echo" or pertains to an intellectual climate which makes concrete influence obsolete. We may speak of a sort of subcutaneous inflow or seepage of the foreign. It appears that nostalgia in a medical sense arrived late and only sporadically on Greek territory, a process accompanied by often perceptible distortions and displacements. During the halting and cautious adaptation of the concept (thanks – in a majority of cases – to authors who are also doctors, or have at least received medical training), nostalgia makes its way into Greek literature not without a few blemishes. One may thus speak of a dual alterity: on the one hand, it is homesickness itself that, whether as malady or moral deviance, always brings the "other" into play. On the other hand, this homesickness requires an agent with knowledge of its original place in European scientific discourse to introduce and cultivate it in the local literature.

Some of the stories of Alexandros Papadiamantis offer a deep insight into the intertwining of homesickness and medicine. Perhaps the best example is the story "Η νοσταλγός" from 1894 which introduces for the first time the term „nostalgic" into the Greek language. In the tale, a young woman named Ljaljó, has been married for some weeks to an estate manager more than twice her age, who has taken her from her family home to the neighbouring island. Though Ljaljó can in fact see her home, just twelve miles distant, she is plagued by a deep longing for her native soil. One evening, in collusion with the young Mathios, who secretly loves her, Ljaljó makes her way to her own island in a

rowboat. The nocturnal voyage is filled with a joyous expectation of magic and unspoken affection, which soon seems to carry over to all of Nature, to the living sea and the helping winds. After a short while, however, her absence is noticed, and Ljaljó's husband and his companions set out in pursuit of the fleeing pair's small vessel. Carried by her profound desire to see her family once more, the protagonist and Mathios reach the distant coast. At almost the same moment, their pursuers catch up, and Ljaljó and her husband – partly from sympathy for her homesickness, partly out of concern for his honor – together make their way to the house of the young woman's parents, while the lovestruck youth remains alone on the shore.

One immediately notices in this and other texts by Papadiamantis, that nostalgia is now a physical ailment. Whether it is actually rooted in the body or whether the afflicted soul simply works on its physical vessel can, in some cases, hardly be determined. But as a psychosomatic clinical condition, nostalgia always weighs so heavy on the physical constitution of Papadiamantis's protagonists that, far beyond any hypochondria, it takes hold of the body, withering it sometimes to the point of death. Ljaljó, described in the text as a fragile creature of alabaster hue, loses her appetite away from her native land, her face turns pale, and her heart begins to pain her. Loss of appetite, pallor, and chest pain may either be read as elements of a catalogue of physical symptoms in the sense established by Johannes Hofer, or as secondary characteristics of an illness caused by the imagination, as Jaspers – in parallel to the definition of hysteria – categorizes homesickness. But while the corporeal and psychological elements of the disease can barely be distinguished in the case of Ljaljó, a glance at another of the same author's stories shows a comparatively unambiguous inscription of nostalgia on the body itself. "Η μετανάστις" suffers from very similar symptoms: she does not eat nor sleep, and gradually loses her healthy color, her body growing weaker as the distance to her home increases, until it finally gives out. The woman's death is, more than anything else, an illustration of the manner in which homesickness targets the body in particular, wasting it away.

Although the systematic representation of nostalgia as illness in the manner of Hofer is only weakly exemplified in the figure of Ljaljó, some traces of the

discourse surrounding Karl Jaspers' concept of homesickness can perhaps more clearly be recognized: Jaspers describes the sort of young woman to which he ascribes a particular susceptibility to pathogenic homesickness as a delicate, sometimes even frail creature, a docile and perhaps almost childlike girl, recognizable not only by her heightened sensitivity, but also by a tendency toward physical feebleness. Thus, Papadiamantis writes about his protagonist's petite figure, the pale translucence of her cheeks, bathed in soft red at the slightest exertion or change in mood. Ljaljó is precisely the phenotype most susceptible to the onslaught of nostalgia.

Hand in hand with this, according to Jaspers, goes the quality that constitutes the paradoxical in the relationship between homesickness and crime. His formulation "delicate creatures of unbelievable barbarity", the petulance which combines with childish innocence to form a sinister complex, constitute a contradiction found also in Ljaljó. Though she commits neither murder nor arson, her cruelty and "crime", her status as a figure of ethical and even legal deviance is manifested when she secretly steals the boat in which she would flee from under the very nose of her husband, accompanied by a young stranger. This violation of both the law of property and the law of marriage displays what one could call a certain suppressed criminal energy, a tendency toward careless yet desperate transgression that stems directly from homesickness and can at best be distinguished quantitatively, but not qualitatively from the list of crimes compiled by Jaspers.

That we are dealing in this story with an admittedly rather harmless realization of "homesickness and crime" is beyond doubt. More important, though, is that collision between delicateness and wickedness expressed in both Jaspers's formulations and in Ljaljó's behaviour. At one point, shortly after the theft of the boat, Papadiamantis writes: "And as though she had carefully thought it all through, she continued: ‚Won't they look for the boat? Won't someone need it? Who does it belong to, anyway?" The introductory subjunctive – as though she had considered her deed – suggests her lack of all consideration or remorse. This underscores her spontaneity and invalidates any expression of doubt. Shortly after, indeed, she says – and the text emphasizes her unconcerned tone

of voice: “The owner of the boat will be looking for his vessel, and Uncle Monachakis for his Ljaljó”. And when the boat owner’s watchdog tries to call attention to the two thieves, Ljaljó shouts with childish glee: “Well then! Let the dog bark after his boat! Just let them try and find me at home!” This erratic oscillation between compunction and desire, between impulse and doubt, presents the protagonist in the same fractured and overdramatic light as Jaspers’s dictum of “delicacy and barbarity”. Here, Ljaljó is a maiden, there an enchantress, now impulsive, now dutiful, so that in her mysterious nature a narrow fissure can be seen, a quiet, palpable breath of the pathogenic.

On the other side is the sternness of her husband, who makes clear to her that, despite her homesickness, it does not behoove her to ever leave him again:

He expounded at length his theory that the wife must always be where her husband is; anything else would defeat the goal of Christian marriage, which, according to the orthodox sources, is not only reproduction, but the chastity of husband and wife. In cases of childlessness, he said, a divorce is prescribed. Besides, the simple perpetuation of the species requires only the natural union, which must be sharply divided from that blessed by the church and legally contracted.

This passage makes clear that homesickness not only implies deviance. It always diverges from the norm in manifold ways. Ljaljó’s husband arrays a whole list of discourses as a corrective to the nostalgia of his wife. He calls on medicine, religion, ethics, social duty, and law; and from the field of biology he borrows the argument of sexual reproduction. All this might be brought into question by nostalgia and its threateningly asocial nature. One can see in this example how homesickness in fact permeates the whole discoursive landscape; how (following Foucault) multiple discourses are always needed for its definition. And Karl Jasper’s text seems to exemplify this transgression of the mono-discursive phenomenon into psychopathology and criminality.

Indeed, Karl Jaspers’s work hints at something, that is artistically realized by Papadiamantis’s story. Homesickness clearly possesses what is in many ways a

boundary-erasing quality: It stimulates the “delicate creature” to acts of tremendous brutality. It transgresses the line between imagination and corporeality. It tends to create a “dual space”, as the nostalgic is always here but also there – at home. Therefore, nostalgia appears as a merging of incongruent character traits, of psyche and soma, of home and abroad. This phenomenon of transgression makes homesickness the “threshold state” par excellence.

This is implemented by the story in many ways: Firstly, the text incorporates the alternative within its fictional universe, thereby transgressing the boundary between itself and a potentially different narrative. For example, a lengthy parenthesis is introduced with the words: “How the author might have turned this idyll into a tragedy, had only his literary consciousness so permitted!” And then, the text deviates from the course of events and proposes a different plot, which in turn is interrupted by the next passage returning to the actual proceedings. But now, of course, one can no longer clearly identify the “actual” course of events. Such moments do not only unveil the text’s “textuality” and narrative structure. They answer to the “threshold state” and the eternal undecidedness of nostalgia itself.

This undecidedness is also shown in the story’s topography. As in the blurring of the mental and the physical, of presence and absence, the text presents an indeterminate sphere of undefined boundaries. As long as homesickness holds sway, the mountain in the distant homeland is always visible. Moreover, from the very beginning, one can say that Ljaljó is simultaneously in a foreign land and already on her way, on the island yet already at sea, as made clear in a passage from the beginning of the text. The young woman stands on the patio of her new house “hard by the sea, presently washed by the waves or girdled with sand, with the flood of the south wind or the ebb of the north”. Similarly, the boat upon which she gazes from her viewpoint “rested partly on land, and rocked partly on the water, the bow on the sand and the stern moved by the waves”. In this spatial constellation, the borders and the coastline are blurred; the house is a boat and the boat is a house, the island is the sea and vice versa, so that Ljaljó seems to stand with one leg here and with the other already on the distant shore. One may point to several other passages of the story indicating an erasing of boundaries, a uniting of that which is sundered. The narrative structure, the fictional space is thus clearly

owed to that same indeterminacy that, according to Jaspers, characterizes homesickness...

Thus, nostalgia as a medical syndrome or transgressive force leaves a distinct trace in the Greek literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, while the discourse – sometimes as scientific knowledge, at other times as an almost unconscious undercurrent of thought – is circulating throughout European culture, one notices an idiosyncratic tension between appropriation and distancing: Greek literature is not just marked by the comparatively restrained pathologization of homesickness at a time when German, French, and English literature have long since appropriated nostalgia as illness and turned it into a topos. Moreover, at the very moment of the concept's transference, Greek cultural instances seem to object to the complete subsumption of homesickness into the discourse of medicine.

This twofold reaction is showcased in Pavlos Nirvanas's novel *Το αγριολούλουδο* (*The Wildflower*, 1924). It was published at almost the same time as the first edition of the *Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, the *Great Greek Encyclopaedia*, put out by the Athenian Phoenix publishing house, which clearly placed "nostalgia" in the sphere of (psycho-)somatic illness:

Nostalgia: Such is named the great sadness, accompanied by a general ebbing of strength and mental and physical weakness, observable in individuals dwelling far from their native lands and their family and social environments and wishing to return home. It […] manifests itself in depression, in combination with a slowing of various psychological and physical functions, i.e. in a state of melancholia, accompanied by a sharp decline in appetite, anorexia, exhaustion, and an inability to work, phenomena which frequently lead to death, unless a timely return home eliminates the cause of the nostalgia and brings recovery. (Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια 1928-29)

This entry is sufficient evidence that the process of the embedding of homesickness in the field of medicine had been completed by the 1920s. And as a writer and doctor, Pavlos Nirvanas possessed all the characteristics needed to

act as the agent of a seamless transmission of the concept to Greek literature. He first seizes upon the familiar semiotics of the body and the thesis of homesickness as illness. Just like the author, the central figure of the novel, the young doctor Alkis Kralis, has an interest in both literature and medicine. He has just completed his studies in Vienna and returns to the Greek capital, armed with the latest discoveries of psychoanalysis. This academically trained physician is also shown to be an aspiring poet, citing Dante and Balzac and reciting poems with gusto. All his poetic descriptions are replete with references to aesthetic concepts or cite artistic sources (as, for example, when comparing his aunt to a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti). Nonetheless, he also tries to build a bridge between literature and his scientific investigations, carefully analyzing fictional texts for signs of assorted mental symptoms. As in his planned project "Neurology and Psychiatry in Homer and the Greek Tragedians", he draws particularly on works of classical literature, using them to develop a theory of psychological disturbances.

However, his promising career appears threatened by his impending marriage to a woman of allegedly inferior intellect. The ambitious young man decides to leave Athens for a time, searching for distance from his fiancée in the mountains of the island of Kephaloniá. But plagued by his own unrest and particularly at the news of his fiancée's suicide, he suffers a nervous breakdown. In his recovery he is helped by the young farm girl Maria. This seeming child of Nature is uneducated, but of noble spirit. Her inborn gentility stems from her way of life, at one with the natural world, which the young woman seems indeed to embody: her voice resounds in the silence of the woods like "the mystical music of the streams"; she is "a wildflower, more beautiful than every bloom in the conservatory"(78). One might think that Maria does not merely resemble Nature, but is Nature itself. When Alkis – now restored to health, if still in a melancholy mood – climbs the highest peak of the island and gazes from the summit, he sees reflected in the landscape Maria, and Maria alone:

He found her everywhere, even in the infinite sea that stretched before his feet, on the distant mountaintops, the airy isles below him, on the earth and in the sky, remote and within him, everywhere, everywhere. Maria filled the entire

world, he felt her existence with nearly metaphysical delight – even beyond this world, in the spheres of imagination, outside of time and space. (125)

At first, the romantic love that blossoms between the unequal partners and their later marriage seem idyllic. For the first year, they delight in mountain hikes and landscapes soaked in moonlight. A certain "pedagogical" relationship also develops between the two, with Alkis serving as a tutor to his wife. In a scientific experiment, with his own "wildflower" as object of research, he delves into the dichotomy of *ars* and *natura*, teaching Maria about literature and painting, instructing her in table manners and social niceties. This state of bliss comes to an end with the couple's departure for Athens, which is accompanied by an increasing lack of interest by Alkis in his wife, who will never fully master the self-confident refinement of an Athenian lady. Maria thereupon falls ill – wracked with severe psychopathological symptoms, with depression, apathy, anaemia, and a lack of appetite. Detached, and with the cool gaze of the physician, Alkis observes the health of his wife deteriorate. He reaches a diagnosis: "I believe [...] that Maria's condition is a nostalgia which she is attempting to conceal from us. A voyage to her home village would restore her completely." (203) The patient's silence concerning her sufferings underscores the conclusion of her doctor and husband:

It is this, in particular, that convinces me that this is a case of homesickness. It was observed by a ship's doctor that, unlike those who feign suffering, true nostalgics generally attempt to keep their homesickness a secret from others. (203)

Even this brief summary of the novel's plot illustrates that two visions of homesickness are in collision here. One is the medical, clearly recognizable as the perspective of a science imported from enlightened Europe. The other is a late Romantic conception which opposes the analytical gaze with the individual blessed by Nature. Accordingly, the "criticism" of nostalgia as a pathology cannot simply be understood as a sceptical rejection of psychophysical patterns of interpretation. Instead, Nirvanas' text oscillates between the strict application of such theories (this betrays the author's fascination with them), and a concept that

is far removed from the merely “medical” and places man in an organic relationship with the cosmos of his life and origins. On the one hand, the author himself becomes the coolly observing subject. He records the processes in the minds and bodies of his characters, exhibiting them as objects in a carefully crafted psychological study, so that the novel reads in parts like a clinical report. At the same time, an almost magical worldview can be discerned, which assumes a deep equivalence between Nature and the human soul, between micro- and macrocosm, and which postulates the merging of the one with the other.

Thus, the mountain wanderings of the young doctor are also an unmistakable reminder of the topoi of Romantic literature, which trace their origin to Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse* and arrive at their typical expression in, for example, Georg Büchner’s *Lenz*. It is the submersion of the subject in a deeply animated world that simultaneously questions and conjoins itself to medical diagnosis. Certainly, then, Nirvanas does not aim at denying nostalgia’s status as a psychological illness with physical symptoms. Nonetheless, his story is not exclusively a case history, but “the story of a human flower […], torn from its natural surroundings to wilt in the atmosphere of the conservatory”, a formulation which calls to mind quite another discourse than the scientific. Just as the text, and even its very title, repeatedly present Maria as plantlike and rooted in Nature, Mina, the sensible friend of the protagonist, takes his wife’s illness back to poetically embellished images of Nature, culminating finally in the admission that nostalgia is simply inexplicable (that it is placed *outside* of all discursive territories):

I see the flower, torn from the earth which gave it birth, withering now slowly in foreign soil. What is the reason for its sad and quiet death? Is it the unfamiliar earth that enfolds its roots? Is it the water that bedews it? Is it the new sun that shines upon it? Is it the new birds that sing around it, the stars that accompany their sleep? No one knows. (208f.)

In accord with the definition of the *Great Greek Encyclopaedia* of 1928, the novel understands nostalgia as a syndrome – and then describes it as a rupture of the mystical bond with the Earth. The resulting tension between psychiatry and

Romanticism does not lead to the exclusion of either; instead, it suffuses the text to its very end. The young Doctor Alkis remains unfathomable, even to himself. He will live his internal contradictions, just as the text locates between discourses. This may be due to the fact that, with respect to nostalgia, Greek literature produces a certain “dislocation”; it seems to alternate between the will to appropriate and a critical distance, as though some of the concepts of European scientific and literary history can only find acceptance in a distilled, yet attenuated form, in the paradoxical form of a “diluted concentrate”.

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Lecture: 11/28/11, 4pm