

Microcosm, Macrocosm: Barbara Hardy, Wyndham Lewis, Mrs. Gaskell, and Nineteenth-Century Narrative

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Cut us off from Narrative, how would the stream of conversation, even among the wisest, languish into detached handfuls, and among the foolish utterly evaporate! Thus, as we do nothing but enact History, we say little but recite it, nay, rather, in that widest sense, our whole spiritual life is built thereon.

BARBARA HARDY QUOTED THESE WORDS FROM CARLYLE'S essay "On History" (1830) in the chapter on Dickens in *Tellers and Listeners* (1975; 165). They evoke the atmosphere of those many occasions when she and I had lunch together (she was a good cook) in her beautiful Earls Court flat. Its floor was covered in eastern carpets; the walls, where not book-lined, were hung with a fine Japanese print by a modern master and scores of intricately mysterious artworks by Barbara's daughter Kate. One spacious drawing room overlooked the change of season among the trees and lawn of a large quiet communal garden. In that flat I would hear of her other daughter Julia's high-powered research into educational psychology, or Barbara might read from an astonishingly copious flow of publications, both academic and creative, that she produced in her "retirement." Particularly memorable were the times when I was one of the first to hear a selection from *Dante's Ghosts* (2013), her exquisite poetic responses to the *Divine Comedy*. But she was also eager to learn the news of my family or to debate whether *The Archers*, a notable UK radio soap opera, was

just melodrama, or something more subtle. Barbara's tastes, though discriminating, were eclectic. When reminiscing about Geoffrey Tillotson, her predecessor as head of the English Department at Birkbeck and a distinguished reader of Pope and Tennyson, she chuckled at a reminder of how he preferred "archy and mehitabel" over *Old Possum's Practical Cats*. Likewise, unfazed by fashion she did not rate Hilary Mantel. No topic was off limits, except (one might have thought) my own research interests. For on losing much of my sight, I had decided to largely abandon my former preoccupation with Eastern influences on British literature. Instead the plan was that I should concentrate on the elephant in the room of British Modernism. The trouble was when first I raised the topic, Barbara had then little or no interest in the artist/writer who Auden remembered as "fuming out of sight / that lonely old volcano of the Right"—Wyndham Lewis. Fortunately for the stream of our conversation (if not for my eyes), I soon discovered that Wyndham Lewis was steeped in nineteenth-century narrative.



This realization came home to me forcibly when I was trying to understand *The Childermass* (1928), the first book in the grotesque mock-epic *The Human Age* about two dead souls exploring the various worlds of an afterlife disturbingly reminiscent of the Age of Dictators. Their guide is no Virgil but a Punch-like person who collaborates with the Devil. Among the work notes for *The Childermass* at the Karl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, I made a startling discovery. In an already fearsome enigma, where the Judgment Seat has been usurped by the Bailiff, an avuncular Anti-Christ, there was a list of quotations coming from, of all things, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). These showed Lewis's close acquaintance with and keen enjoyment of Austen's novel. Why he had made this list and what its role was in the genesis of *The Human Age* were questions I tried to answer in an essay on "The Alice in Wonderland world of Jane Austen and Trollope" in 2008. And, of course, it was Barbara Hardy's *A Reading of Jane Austen* (1975) that provided me with a vital clue:

Lucy's story is a perfect instance of the imaginative corruption of narrative which many excellent narrative artists have liked to imagine: Virgil's Sinon, lying his way into Troy; Satan to Eve, lying his way into Eden; and Iago to Othello, lying his way to destruction. Lucy's style is noticeably less elegant than Sinon's, Satan's, or Iago's, but her technique is very like theirs. It relies on a sharp perception of her listener, a histrionic ability to act out lies and a delight in pitting an uninhibited rationality against the restrictions of honesty. (90)

That analysis fits Lewis's Bailiff like a glove. In subsequent conversations with Barbara Hardy, I realized that her comparison of Lucy Steele with Satan in the garden of Eden sheds light on more than *The Childermass*. The entire sequence of *The Human Age* made more sense when Barbara referred to *Paradise Lost*. It was not just the plausible lies of the Bailiff that were explained, nor the fact that both he and Lucy Steele are diabolical blocking agents, with the latter delaying the union of Elinor with Edward Ferrars and the former delaying the souls passage across the River Styx into what may be the Heavenly City. More than just illuminating *The Childermass*, Barbara's placing of Lucy's malign scheming alongside the Fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise means that from its beginning, Miltonic as well as Dantesque aspirations were central to Lewis's conception of his mock eschatological epic. Therefore, perhaps, no great fissure (as some commentators have argued) divides the first book of *The Human Age* from its sequels *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* (both 1955).

The next memorable consultation with Barbara Hardy was again occasioned by a disconcerting encounter with Lewis's interest in the nineteenth-century novel. Almost midway through *Self Condemned* (1954), the rather unpleasant protagonist tires of some shipboard reading:

He went out on to the deck and swinging his arm back hurled the heavy book out to sea. After that he returned to their stateroom, lay down, and instantly fell asleep. At dinner Dr. Lincoln Abbott remarked slyly, "What book was it, Professor, that I saw you throwing into the sea?" "That," René told him, "was a novel called *Middlemarch*." "You express your disapproval very forcibly, Professor," Dr. Abbott laughed. "You should try one of our American

novelists, Professor. Have you ever read any books by Steinbeck? No? Well I wonder if *The Grapes of Wrath* is in the ship's library." (SC 191)

Given the ill-repute now surrounding Lewis, readers of *Self Condemned* may be forgiven should they miss the irony, particularly as such an adverse view of Lewis's achievement here seems justified when later on in this complex work there are distorted echoes of the fairy-tale opening of Gaskell's most endearing novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66). Lewis's appropriation of Gaskell looks rather different, however, when surveyed from the perspective of Picasso's art of reconfiguring the Old Masters. In recent years the provocative way in which Picasso challenged the art of the past has been the subject of two major exhibitions, *Picasso et les maitres* (Paris, 2008–09) and a smaller but equally informative show in London in 2010. These exhibitions confirmed earlier accounts of the Spanish painter's reconfiguration of the art of the masters. Long ago, in *The Caliph's Design* (1919), Lewis had detected the rich play on words and rebuses, images and ideas, in the Spaniard's practice: "Even Cézanne Picasso stands on his head. He takes Cézanne at his word: when Cézanne says . . . 'tout est sphérique et cylindrique,' Picasso parodies this paradox. . . . Picasso gives us very complete interpretations of Cézanne, Daumier, El Greco, Ingres, Puvis" (WLA 172).

A generation later, Lewis wrote what may well have been the only favorable notice of that controversial yet well attended post-war London exhibition of Picasso in December 1945. In a review entitled "Towards an Earth Culture" (1946), Lewis is ever more drawn to Picasso, slightly misquoting the artist's description of his often grotesque reshaping of past art as "a sum of destructions" (WLA 381–92; 385). Significantly, in 1947 Lewis begins to talk teasingly about *Self Condemned*. Was there in George Eliot's novel a scene comparable to its monstrous ditching in *Self Condemned*? Prompted by Leland Monk's work on chance, I looked at the auction scene in *Middlemarch* (1871). In chapter 60, Eliot uses a traditional device of the puzzle book, "a sort of practical rebus," to expose the plot whereby Bulstrode cheats Will Ladislaw out of his inheritance. Lewis has teasingly appropriated this expressive device of a booklet within a book and enlarged it into a jettisoned copy of Eliot's masterpiece.

In his 1925 novel *Les Faux-monnayeurs* André Gide employed the phrase “mise en abyme” to describe this traditional heraldic device of self-reflexive embedding in a range of art forms. Lewis’s conception of the Atlantic ocean as “the dark rolling abyss” (SC 184) suggests how he plays on the literal meaning of “mise en abyme” as “thrown into the abyss.” The word “abyss” itself has a fascinating multiple significance. On the one hand, it is symbol of depth in general and, on the other, of the diametrically opposed supernatural destinations of heaven and hell, between which René and his wife must choose. In *Self Condemned* the proliferation of references to “The House that Jack Built” raises the question as to whether Lewis was reshaping another “mise en abyme” from *Middlemarch*. In chapter 57 of Eliot’s novel, at a critical juncture in the relationship of Fred Vincy, Mary Garth, and the Rev. Farebrother, a kitten causes the tea things to fall thereby providing Eliot (and Lewis) with the context for a vital allusion to “the house that Jack built” (540). The phrase is often used in a derisory sense. In *Self Condemned* this derision is magnified by repeated allusions that reflect, in turn, Harding’s foolish career choices, the state of the nation, and most threateningly, the state of the entire cosmos. In *Middlemarch* the allusion hints at the fate of the protagonists in the love triangle forming one of the novel’s three plots. In effect, “the house that Jack built” forms part of a brilliant constellation of rebuses in Eliot’s text, comprising mirrors, microcosms, or “mises en abyme” which structure the novel and signal its proto-modernist features (see Caracciolo, “The Enemy’s ‘Sum’”).

Initially, Barbara Hardy rejected such arguments and insisted that I was “reading Eliot in a twenty-first century way.” But then absorbing the force of the Picasso/Lewis connection, she contradicted herself: “No I understand. You’re seeing it from a doubly Modernist perspective.” With her usual shrewdness, she quickly realized this perspective reinforced her observation that “[t]hrough the forms of literary narrative, large and small, macrocosmic and microcosmic, we may elucidate these fundamental narrative processes” (*Tellers and Listeners*. 4–5). With characteristic generosity, she encouraged my approach, especially to Gaskell. The following exploration of parallels between *North and South* (1854–55), *Middlemarch*

(1871–72), and *Self-Condemned* serves as my own tribute to a great teacher, whose vision and stimulus operated in ways both “large and small.”



Self exiled in Canada during World War II, Lewis may have been driven by homesickness to find inspiration in Eliot’s and Gaskell’s world. The overt references to George Eliot extend beyond the episode of the confiscated copy of *Middlemarch*. Where the author of *North and South* is concerned, though, the evidence is largely implicit. Lewis notes, “[René] had read few of the English classics, and thought he would turn to them now” (*SC* 190). The plurality emphasized in the choice of words here suggests that more than just Eliot’s novels were included among Harding’s (and his author’s) shipboard selection of books. Lewis specifically refers to Mrs. Gaskell in *The Writer and the Absolute*, which he wrote two years after *Self-Condemned*. In the study he repeatedly compares the plot requirements of the Victorian public with those of modernist texts, and detects similarities in theme, plot, and character. It is no mere coincidence that both Eliot’s Casaubon and Lewis’s Harding are historians who disastrously fail to realize the genuine potential in their professional ambitions.

But in certain respects, the intellectual and emotional situation of René and Hester Harding more strikingly resembles the circumstances of the displaced southern family in Gaskell’s *North and South*. Both novels start with challenges to authority being unwisely mounted by the central male figure. For while the Reverend Mr. Hale is not strictly the main protagonist of *North and South*, Charlotte Brontë and to a lesser degree Charles Dickens apparently thought him so.¹ In both novels these thematic concerns radically shape the plot, and in the same way: disbelief in the current orthodoxy necessitates life-changing alterations of career. As Professor Harding leaves Oxford, so the Reverend Hale, albeit in less cavalier fashion, gives up his living in the Church of England. Both become tutors

¹ Angus Easson argues that Hale shares that role with his daughter Margaret; see “Mr. Hale’s Doubts” 31.

to wealthy men in strange lands. A “wild and bleak country” (NS 39) figures among Margaret Hale’s fears. Moreover, at least one inhabitant of Milton, the northern town in Gaskell’s novel, repeatedly views Hale’s daughter as a foreigner. As well as having meteorologically a more northerly climate, Momaco (a composite of several Canadian cities) has to the Hardings’ eyes the look of an “English midland city” (SC 215). Crucially in both novels the momentous decision to change career and relocate is taken without the husband consulting his wife, though other relatives are informed. Failing to adjust to the new circumstances, both spouses eventually perish.

The sub-plot of *North and South* also emphasizes the theme of defiance with Frederick Hale’s rebellion against the captain of the ship. The clergyman’s son, as a disgraced British naval officer, is obliged to seek alternative employment with a foreign government in the New World, and subsequently to contemplate conversion to the Church of Rome in self-imposed exile overseas. The long-term consequences of Hale’s participation in a naval mutiny and subsequent renunciation of England may have influenced Lewis’s symbolic representation of Harding’s own shipboard act of cultural treason. The comparison sheds new light on the impact that Eliot and Gaskell exercised on Lewis’s use of recursive devices in his fiction. Victorian literary techniques were coalescing in his mind with modernist ones, as his 1940 essay on the Picasso retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art indicates. His focus on the terms “microcosm” and “arabesques” (WLA 356) in this piece suggests the importance to his own fiction of this tropical conjunction.

These terms were also crucial to Gaskell as a novelist. Famously, in addressing her as his “dear Scheherazade” (Cook 197), Dickens praised her brilliant use of relevant tales from the Eastern story collections. These function as key links in an intricate chain of “mises en abyme” unifying *North and South*. Gaskell uses “The Story of the Eastern King” (NS 30) and “The Fisherman and the Genie” (NS 399) to emphasize her concern with challenges to authority and the consequences that engulf the Hale family and their friends, old and new. Wittily, Gaskell’s allusions feature disbelievers who learn their lesson by being literally immersed in an alien but consciousness-raising element. The temporal aspect of these immersions

does vary. The Eastern King merely dips his head in a basin of water, whereas the disobedient Genie is imprisoned by King Solomon in a bottle and then thrown to the bottom of the sea for aeons. But both are immersed in an another infinitely vaster and transformative dimension. The possibility of some kind of deliberately distorted parallel between King Solomon's punishment of the Genie and the watery grave to which Professor Harding condemns George Eliot's novel is intriguing.

Lewis's knowledge of the *Arabian Nights* was considerable. Among telling allusions in *Tarr* (1928), there is a nocturnal allusion, conjoined with notable examples of other recursive devices (44, 46-47).² The spelling of "Khalife" in the novel suggests the influence of Burton's translation, and indicates the author would have been well able to recognize these resonances in Gaskell. Lewis probably spotted her debt to the 1839-40 Lane translation. He himself was apparently stimulated by the J. C. Mardrus's and E. P. Mather's respective versions of *The Thousand and One Nights* published in 1904 and 1923. The fact that in *Self Condemned*, Lewis does not openly acknowledge his debt to "The Story of the Fisherman and Genie" allows him to turn the *Arabian Nights* story inside out. He conveys no sense of a heretical genie being confined in a bottle. On the contrary, the significant object René throws away contains nothing less than the spirit of a culture that Eliot embodies in her masterpiece. Lewis himself sprang from this culture, which in turn shaped the anti-hero of *Self Condemned*. From this Picasso-esque "sum of all destructions," the repercussions multiply. Just as René's wife Hester throws herself under a truck, so too does his jettisoning of *Middlemarch* in the mid-Atlantic presage his own intellectual suicide in the novel.

Similarly, some of Gaskell's most expressive borrowings from the Eastern tales are implied. For example, it is more than probable she was aware of "The Young King of the Black Islands," the sequel to "The Story of the Fisherman and the Genie," in which a Lady comes through the wall on what is in effect the first stage of a rescue mission.³ The recollection

² See Ghazoul for a discussion of nocturnal poetics.

³ Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle were intimately familiar with these stories; see *CL* 32: 52-55.

of this incident may inform the way that Gaskell handles Margaret Hale's intervention on behalf of her brother. Several parallels are detectable between *North and South* and "The Young King of the Black Isles," which may be potential sources for Darkshire, the county in which Milton is placed. Further parallels between this nocturnal story are even more strongly suggested in the confrontation scene between Thornton and Margaret, and the strikers, who form "an angry sea of men." The demonic nature of the Genie is twice evoked in the sound of the mob producing "a fiendlike noise" (NS 176–77, 178).

Gaskell anticipates this fusion of the two tales from the *Arabian Nights* in the nocturnal allusion she includes earlier in chapter ten. This is the episode where Thornton's explanation of the delicately adjusted "might of the steam-hammer," recalls to Mr. Hale "some of the wonderful stories of subservient genii in the Arabian Nights—one moment stretching from earth to sky and filling all the width of the horizon, at the next obediently compressed into a vase small enough to be borne in the hand of a child" (NS 81). Using Thornton as her spokesman, Gaskell goes on to view industrialization and the growth of commerce and democracy in nocturnal terms. There may be only one more or less exactly similar word—"wonderful" and "wonder"—but in his discourse synonyms and imagery echo those used in Hale's summary of "The Story of the Fisherman and the Genie": "And *this imagination of power, this practical realisation of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town. That every man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels [italics added] still.*" At every step and with a subtle poetry—particularly in the transition "from the hand of a child" to "out of one man's brain in our good town" (NS 81)—Gaskell extends the range of her nocturnal allusions.



S. S. Praver has remarked, "The trouble with [such] comparisons is that so often one of the important functions of similarity is to remind us of difference" (184). For all the disenchantment with the Ribbon of the Legion of Honour that René Harding feels on landing in Canada (SC ch. 10), costume

does not play the significant role in Lewis's novel that it does in *North and South*. Carlyle's influence in picturing the industrial strife in Milton has been the subject of valuable commentary. Less often noted is the impact of Professor Teufelsdröckh's observation on Gaskell's description of Edith's chronic inability to wear the shawls in her trousseau, especially in the episode where the garment becomes a carpet. How the polymath author of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) must have relished Edith's self-mockery of her plight on Corfu: "[Y]ou have no idea of the heat here! I tried to wear my great beauty Indian shawl at a pic-nic. . . . I was like mamma's little dog Tiny with an elephant's trappings on; smothered, hidden, killed with my finery (*NS* 235). Tellingly, this is an episode so pregnant with meaning that the joke may also be directed towards modern European readers, particularly those unaware of the intricate semiotics of Oriental fabrics.

From the Napoleonic period until the 1870s the Indian shawl was all the vogue; then for a century it was out of fashion in the West. Happily over the past three decades there have been several exhibitions with titles evoking the acculturative, commercial, literary, or geopolitical significance of their objects, including *La mode du châle cachemire en France* (Paris, 1982), *The Oriental Carpet in London* (London, 1983), *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (Washington, DC, 1987), *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* (London, 1999), and *The Fabric of India* (London, 2015). Such exhibitions have served to illuminate the wider cultural meaning of these textiles. In the impromptu fashion show with which *North and South* begins, Gaskell's description of these shawls and the assembled ladies' estimate of their price and aesthetic worth are at once shrewd and sensuous: "Mrs. Gibson, a lady who was taking a double interest in the conversation, . . . one of her daughters having been married within the last few weeks. 'Helen had set her heart upon an Indian shawl, but really when I found what an extravagant price was asked, I was obliged to refuse her. She will be quite envious when she hears of Edith having Indian shawls. What kind are they? Delhi? with the lovely little borders?'" (*NS* 7).

About their cost, where the best are to be found, and their patchwork construction, Mrs. Gibson is knowledgeable but not quite as well informed as her author. Gaskell herself owned four

remarkable shawls.⁴ So in her account of Margaret's sensitive delight in the shawls, the novelist signals the authenticity of the General's gift: "Margaret went down laden with shawls, and snuffing up their spicy Eastern smell. . . . She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours" (*NS* 9). Margaret's unassuming, competent, self-assurance is evident in the way she models her cousin's shawls in the Harley Street drawing room. Barbara Hardy was characteristically acute when she identified the exotic shawl as "a highly important image in the world of *North and South*" ("Two Women" 19–20). But the shawl functions as more than a social object. Gaskell insists that these shawls are the gift of the General, a source of venerated authority. Through Mrs. Gibson's suggestion that they were sourced in Delhi, Gaskell strongly hints that their significance goes far beyond any one society and age.

Into these exotic shawls is woven the history of a succession of empires, which Gaskell implies in Mrs. Gibbon's query about the provenance of General's gift. The answer involves not just a place but an epochal historic event whereby an alien Islamic dynasty had conquered a major portion of the Hindu Subcontinent. Also implied is Akbar the Great's preference for a type of Kashmir shawl that had set the style for the Mughal court at Delhi.⁵ The imperial associations of these shawls have consequences for both the symbolic structure of *North and South* as well as its global and historic context. The wearing of these Indian shawls takes Margaret, if not Edith, from the childhood realm of Perrault's fairy stories (the cousins are distinguished in terms of his tales of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella) into the more adult empire of *The Arabian Nights*. In the course of her modeling of these gorgeous textiles, Margaret is amused to glimpse her reflection in the mirror, revealing "familiar features in the usual garb of a princess" (*NS* 9).

In her first encounter with Thornton when Margaret begins to establish her authority over him, "an Indian shawl [first] hung about her in long heavy folds, . . . which she wore as an empress wears her drapery" (*NS* 62–63). She wears a muslin gown and is

⁴ See Lundie, "Gaskell and Shawls."

⁵ See Schimmel, 170–71.

busy at needle-work in chapter 10 when she overhears Thornton expatiate on the marvels of the steam hammer and her father makes comparison with that “The Story of the Fisherman and the Genie” (*NS* 79–81). Mr. Bell conjures up a very different genie from *The Arabian Nights* when giving thought to Margaret’s future marriage: “[S]he is a very precious creature, . . . I can’t match her yet. When I can, I shall bring my young man to stand side by side with your young woman, just as the genie in the Arabian Nights brought Prince Caralmazan to match with the fairy’s Princess Badoura” (*NS* 337–38).

The profusion of exotic shawls in *North and South*—ten references in volume 1, chapter 1, and two more in volume 1, chapter 7, and the “splendid black lace mantilla” (*NS* 343–44) in volume 2, chapter 16—reinforces Cornelia Cook’s remark that in the novel, the North is “practically framed in South” (199). But this remarkable exotic shawl pattern does not so much “frame” the events in the provinces, as it serves to remind readers of the beautiful arabesques on the most exquisite fine shawls, some of which were in the novelist’s possession. The emphasis placed by this interweaving pattern brings out other aspects of this expressively intricate novel, with its variety of locations in which the theme of problematic obedience in church, navy, manufacturing, and university is played out. The shawls also evoke global perspectives, which set this microcosm of domestic and national events in the history of the interaction of two continents.



Such perspectives inevitably bring this discussion back to Barbara Hardy, and the conversations I enjoyed with her for over twenty years about literature, art, and culture. Towards Wyndham Lewis, she had always been skeptical. She admitted having read *Tarr*, his satire on Bohemian life in pre-war Paris—“Peter, there was nothing else to read at the time”—and more recently she had looked at his story “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” (1917), the grim Great War burlesque of Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Trumpet Major* (1880). Since we shared broadly left-wing views, I was looking forward to a lively conversation about Lewis’s critique of Soviet Communism and Italian Fascism when the sad news arrived that Barbara had died on 12 February 2016 at the

age of 92. Following her wake I went in search of obituaries. By chance I came across her account of Professor Kathleen Tillotson in *The Guardian*, published 6 June 2001. It was clear that in this obituary, Barbara had taken a cue from her beloved Shakespeare, specifically Mark Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*. Although Barbara knew and respected the work of critics such as Walter Benjamin and Gaston Bachelard, her defense of an old colleague and friend reads like her own *apologia pro vita sua*:

Kathleen Tillotson had a vast knowledge of Victorian literature. . . . An old-style scholar educated in bibliographical skills and the old historicism—now and then not so easily distinguished from the new, she was also a fine critic. . . . [She] was born too soon to be influenced by the revolutions of the new criticism, but her curt observations are grains worth the sheaves of many others. . . . Perhaps her critical intelligence was at its most free and easy in her public lectures, traditionally perfected, controlled and reserved, but brightened by flowerings of style and warmed by the personal nuances of a voice her husband Geoffrey Tillotson (the even more literary critic) liked to call *contralto*.

Still glamorous though frail in her eighties (getting back that gleaming helmet of hair after treatment for cancer), Barbara Hardy herself had an altogether profounder reach of critical and creative intelligence, a greater warmth and wit, and a more eloquent voice than either Tillotson. I grieve that unless recordings are found, I shall not hear those beautiful tones again except as recalled in reading her books. Happily there are several more on the way, among them, a study of Ivy Compton-Burnett, to be published by Edinburgh University Press. It will be another masterpiece, her latest.

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