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Ghanim J. Mohammad  
Samarraï  
University of Sharjah

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## Robert Browning's Impact on T. S. Eliot

### S T R A C T

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The debate about Robert Browning's influence on T. S. Eliot's use of dramatic monologue is by no means over. It has always been a focal point among critics to the extent that one can claim that no discussion of his use of the form can be complete without a reference to Browning, who was one of the most renowned poets in practicing the form. Therefore, critics have not ceased to compare T. S. Eliot with that Victorian poet, who preferred to create the art that conceals art. However, the extent of an impact from Browning on Eliot has been much debated, and, sometimes, contested, in the last several decades. The controversy is exacerbated as Eliot himself attempted to imply that there were more differences between Browning and himself than similarities.

This paper aims at making a modest contribution to the ever-rising interest in the comparative studies in the Arab world by focusing on thoughts about the 'ethics' of comparative literature, and Eliot's work is one of the best areas of research that serves this purpose. More specifically, the paper aims at shedding light on Eliot's reticence in the context of 'influences in literature', a matter that Harold Bloom discusses extensively in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*.

الخلاصة

تواصل المناقشات حول تأثير روبرت برونينج على استخدام تي إس إليوت لتقنية المناجاة الشعرية. لقد كان هذا الموضوع مركز اهتمام النقاد لدرجة يمكن معها القول بأن مناقشة هذا الاستخدام لم تتم دون الإشارة إلى براونينج، الذي اشتهر بممارسة هذا النوع من الكتابة. لذلك لم يتوقف النقاد عن مقارنة إليوت بذلك الشاعر الفكتوري الذي كان يفضل صناعة الأدب الذي كان يخفي أكثر مما يفصح. بالإضافة إلى ذلك فقد تواصل النقاش على مدى عقود مستندا بجانب منه إلى حقيقة أن إليوت حاول بنفسه أن يوحي بأن هناك الكثير من الخلافات بينه وبين براونينج أكثر مما متشابهين.

يحاول هذا البحث تقديم مساهمة متواضعة لدراسات الأدب المقارن في الوطن العربي بالتركيز على أخلاقيات الأدب المقارن، خصوصا أن أعمال إليوت هي أكثر النماذج خدمة لهذا الهدف. كما يهدف هذا البحث بشكل خاص إلى إلقاء الضوء على تردد إليوت في الإفصاح عن مكوناته في سياق التأثيرات الأدبية.

**I. Introduction:**

T. S. Eliot's role in the literary scene of the twentieth century deserves fresher consideration than before, especially in our part of the world, the Arab Homeland, where he was a celebrated master of poetry for decades. The man, who has had immeasurable impact on English literature and on many other national literatures throughout the world, has shaped "so much of our contemporary mental world" (Rabaté, 1994: 211). He still enjoys, especially within circles of admirers, the position of "one of the two or three most creative and influential figures in twentieth-century literature" (Sullivan, 1973: iv).

However, readers often observe that Eliot was full of literary echoes: some of the known themes and techniques, which flow in the streams of his poetry, were borrowed and/or assimilated and then incorporated and integrated in his work, as is the case – possibly to a certain extent – with many other great writers, including William Shakespeare. As such, some of those who have believed in this theory of assimilation and incorporation and then integration, may – sometimes – look good-willed when their viewpoints are screened under tougher tools of microscopic examination. We currently have an increasing number of critics who think that though Eliot's reputation still stands high, there are signs of doubt and disaffection creeping in. The looming relegation draws upon some critics' hard stance which went, perhaps, too far in suggesting that "even when the aged eagle spread his wings in *Ash Wednesday* in 1930," he remained for them "a bird of prey only, ... who snatched what he required from other men's acres and produced nothing readable of his own" (Ibid: iii).

Having all these points in mind, I still find it interesting to go to what Eliot, who is famous, not only for his allusions and for his quotations, but for his stealings from other poets (Longenbach, 1994: 176), had once revealed:

The possibility of each literature renewing itself, proceeding to new creative activity, making new discoveries in the use of words, depends on ... its ability to receive and assimilate influences (1973: 114).

Because of this, perhaps, Eliot succeeded – at least in the opinion of fewer admirers than ever – in creating unique and coherent works of art of all these borrowings and impulses. The moral of this is that "one should have a less moralistic view of influence: it need not be a fault or a sign of weakness to be influenced by others" (Hermerén, 1975: 130-131).

However, I have to consider that Eliot reveals and conceals. He admits sources and disavows others. In addition, even when he admits, he sometimes casts shadows, especially with regard to a number of controversial matters, at the forefront of which – at least for the purposes of this research – stands out the issue of his use of the Dramatic Monologue.

The debate about this issue is by no means over. It has always been a focal point among critics to the extent that one can claim that no discussion of his use of the form can be complete without a reference to Robert Browning, who was one of the most renowned writers in practicing the form. Therefore, critics have not ceased to compare T. S. Eliot with that Victorian poet, who preferred to create the art that conceals art (Bell and Grebanier, 1994: 182).

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Besides, the extent of an impact from Browning on Eliot has been much debated, and, sometimes, contested, in the last several decades. The controversy is exacerbated as Eliot himself attempted to imply that there were more differences between Browning and himself than similarities.

This controversy still invites researchers to attempt to answer what Sheila Sullivan referred to as the challenge set by Eliot's work, which has shaped "so much of our contemporary mental world" (Rabaté: 211). Hence is this paper. In it, I may make a modest contribution to the ever-rising interest in the comparative studies in the Arab world by focusing on thoughts about the 'ethics' of comparative literature, and Eliot's work is one of the best areas of research as "there is too much life in his work for the accepted ideas to contain it" (Moody, 1994: xiii). More specifically, the paper aims at shedding light on Eliot's reticence in the context of 'influences in literature', a matter that Harold Bloom discusses extensively in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Bloom, 1997).

The mission is, however, not easy. "His poetry," one critic says, "presents difficulties of numerous allusions, use of foreign language[s], use of metaphysical conceit, and an absence of obvious narrative structure" (Reuben, 2007). However, another difficulty arising from the fact that Eliot himself did not help very much, for he never cared for explanations. He was in fact excessively obsessed with the idea of keeping the broadest possible "gulf that should separate personally felt emotion and the emotions evoked by poetry, formulating such doctrines as the 'impersonal theory of poetry' and the 'objective correlative'" (Miller, 1977:35). He made it clear, more than once, that he wanted no biography to be written, urged his friends to remain silent, and inserted a clause to this effect into his will. To that end, those responsible for his estate (primarily his widow, acting as executor of his will) successfully prevented a biography by making access to the materials necessary for writing a biography difficult if not impossible (Ibid : 166). Surprisingly, this was also true, to some extent, of Robert Browning himself, the "tremendous and incomparable" writer (Karlin, 1989: 12), who preferred to avoid confessional writings and the technique he invented, after writing dialogues for actors for years, enabled him through imaginary speakers to avoid explicit autobiography.

This 'forbidden territory', to borrow James Miller's words, has blurred some readers for a long time. Nonetheless, I share some critics' speculation "on connections between the life and the poetry" of Eliot (Miller: 166) and, therefore, the paper will draw upon implications from Eliot's poetry about his inward experience, a thing which he himself terms as a transfusion of the personality, i.e. the life of the author into the character (Eliot, 1997: 118). The paper will also make use of Eliot's habit of theorizing, his habit of posting out thoughts, concepts, and information which he felt were relevant to the understanding of his poetry. He once remarked that "a large part of any poet's 'inspiration' must come from his reading and from his knowledge of history." (Eliot, 1986: 148)

Therefore, I believe researchers can do well by taking a closer look at his readings, his concepts, and his poetry; they can observe, analyze, infer, and judge.

## II. Eliot's Early Readings

When he began writing poetry at an early age, Eliot might well have modelled himself on English poets; he read "[Robert] Browning as part of his school curriculum" (Ackroyd, 1984: 26). However, "the forms of Tennyson and Poe, Browning and Whitman, might have been depicted as struggling for mastery over the eventual direction of the enfant poet" (ibid: 15). In addition, his journey to Paris in September 1910 played a very crucial role in the making of his poetics. There, he studied French literature at the College de France for one year, and attended lectures given, at the College de France, by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who talked of instinctive consciousness and the breaking down of orderly thought into a stream of disconnected impressions. Bergson's influence was very strong on Eliot, who was temporarily converted to Bergson's philosophical interest in the progressive evolution of consciousness. He was also deeply impressed by Jules Laforgue's use of the persona and the dramatic monologue in his poems of alienation. But when he returned to Harvard for his doctoral studies (1911-14) he was attracted more to the philosophy of Bergson's neo-idealist critic F.H. Bradley, (Shusterman, 1994: 32) perhaps because – mostly – it dealt with the relationship of the subjective consciousness with the objective world. Very important in this regard is that Eliot "produced a searching philosophical critique of the psychology of consciousness," (Bush, 1999) which strengthened his resort to the dramatic monologue technique.

Noticeably, Eliot attributes his greatest debt to French poets, especially the most influential Laforgue, "more than to any one poet in any language" (Eliot, 1992: 25).

Therefore, it has not been an easy job for some critics to decisively recognize the subtle influence, and the task is made more difficult when the issue of Eliot's acknowledgement of debt comes to the frontline of the debate.

Nevertheless, Matthiessen, as an example, says that writers of the literary history of the twentieth century would definitely find out that "Eliot's development of the dramatic soliloquy, a form that has been called 'the most flexible and characteristic genre of English verse, ' cannot be divorced from the impetus furnished by Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864)" (Matthiessen, 1969: 73). Ezra Pound, Eliot's 'master', emphatically states that the author of *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was a successor to Browning (Eliot, 1954: 419-20). In these two poems (and in other poems, especially *La Figlia Che Piange*, *Preludes*, and *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*), Eliot has "some of the robustness of Robert Browning" (Bush: 2). Besides, Robert Langbaum, on his part, observes that:

The dramatic monologue is proportionately as important in Eliot's work as in Browning's, Eliot having contributed more to the development of the form than any poet has since Browning (1986: 71).

And though critics observed that "interest in the dramatic monologue began to decline" at the end of the nineteenth century, modernist poets, such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot "were nevertheless influenced by the monologues of Robert Browning, admiring both Browning's use of the rhythms and language of speech and what they saw as his insights concerning human nature"

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(Byron, 2003: 113).

Why then did Eliot not acknowledge his debt to Browning as he did to others?

To answer this question, let us first try to see what it was in Browning that so appealed to Eliot.

**III. Browning's Dramatic Monologue**

As a point of departure, I may follow here Glenn Everett's suggestion that the dramatic monologue has three requirements: the reader takes the part of the silent listener, the speaker uses a case-making, argumentative tone, and we, readers, complete the dramatic scene from within by means of inference and imagination (Everett, 2006). This means that a poem must have a speaker and an implied auditor in order to be a dramatic monologue, and that the reader often perceives a gap between what that speaker says and what he or she actually reveals. The reader may take the part of the listener, and this point of view is always available within the form. Indeed, the auditor may appear to be dead, absent, inattentive, or simply an imagined person. As Everett proposes, whether this auditor is present does not matter so long as we find the speaker using the same kind of case-making, argumentative tone. The real listener, the target of the argument, is – to borrow Everett's words – the speaker's "second self". Usually, the tone of the argument tells us that there is a second point of view present, and it is that point of view which we take. It is this strongly rhetorical language that distinguishes the dramatic monologue from the soliloquy, for it shows the speaker arguing with a second self (Langbaum, 1985: 23). We may need to observe here that the listeners in Browning's poems never speak, and when they do, we do not hear their words but as rephrased by the monologist. This is likely because "the dynamics of dialogue differ quite markedly from those of monologue" (Everett, 2006).

Do these technical rules reflect Browning's poetics in Eliot?

As Thomas Hardy remarks, Robert Browning was the literary puzzle of the nineteenth century, a statement that foregrounds the reason why many modern critics saw him as a poet haunted with masks. They believe his poetry departed from the central stylistic tradition in Victorian poetry, which favoured smoothly polished texture, elevated diction and subject matter, and pleasing liquidity of sound; he was fond of a more colloquial and harshly discordant style and odd, unexpected juxtapositions.

The debate about this kind of poetry and about Browning's character was – in the early stages of Modernism – ongoing intensely in London and far from being settled. In addition, when this debate was part of an enthusiastic process for modernizing English poetry, Eliot was there.

**IV. Eliot and the Dramatic Monologue**

After a period of active engagement in writing poetry and criticism, Eliot's health deteriorated and he felt that – in order for him to concentrate more – he needed tranquility. At the advice of his specialist, he went in 1921 to Switzerland where he got "well enough to be working on a poem," and that poem – brought back to London in 1922 with great pride – was *The Waste Land*.

This poem and other several major poems are cast in the mould of monologues. Why? Possibly, because masks facilitate presenting different

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characters who speak in the first person. The presence of the reader as confidant/confidante is frequently hinted at; and along with an unmistakable dramatic quality, there is also sometimes a tone of intimate confession.

How did Eliot's poetry get this feature? Does it appear consistently in the poems Eliot wrote over the years?

I could have suggested that we first examine the critics' accounts of the matter, but it seems that a more tempting choice is ready at hand. Eliot himself, though years after he had established his leading position in modernism, tackled two important things in this context. In a lecture delivered at Cambridge in 1953, he comprehensively spoke of three distinct voices of poetry and of the historical sense. In connection with the voices of poetry, Eliot believes that the first is the voice of the poet talking to himself - or to nobody; the second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience; and the third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character in verse. (Eliot, 1973: 89) By doing this, Eliot recognizes Browning's special contribution to a "new voice" in poetry. In the same lecture, Eliot acknowledges that there is an important form of "dramatic" verse other than that designed for the stage and in this type of verse Browning excels (Ibid: 100). He further indicates that Browning's dramatic method pointed in the direction of modern poetry. This is a clear 'confession' that should not be overlooked; Eliot's modernistic buildup might have substantially taken Browning's dramatic feature as a major point of departure, especially as he focuses in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* on the relation of a poem to its author, and in this connection uses the phrase "impersonal theory" of poetry and art.

In fact, Eliot had very frequently discussed the relation between the poet and his personae. He was especially concerned with the distinction between the poet's emotions and the emotions of the characters he presents. "Poetry," he believes, "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" as no writer can "produce great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality" (Eliot, 1999: 21). With this statement, Eliot once again confesses - though very subtly - that emotion has its place in a poem, though it is not directly expressed. Then he emphatically admits that "what every poet starts from is his own emotions" (Ibid: 22), though not his personal emotions. In doing this, he prepares the mind to accept a sort of objectification, which later becomes one of the basic devices in his modernistic approach, i.e. the objective correlative. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art, says Eliot, "is by finding an 'objective correlative.' In other words, it is a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Ibid: 145). In this sense, the poem builds upon the psychic structure of the poet's feeling, and consequently, the whole life of the author is transformed into his work. "The creation of a work of art, we will say the creation of a character in a drama, consists in the transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author into the character." Moreover, since the process is one of transfusion, then a poet, any poet, can express his/her feelings as much through a dramatic, as through a lyrical form.

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**V. Areas of Differences**

Comparing Eliot's theories about the poet's personal experience and the need for dramatic poetry to what we received from Browning's tradition makes it obvious that there are various differences between the two men's poetic styles. With regard to the exterior form, Browning's dramatic monologue relies on an observable pattern of narrative sequence, which presents a sort of logical and systematic exposition of the subject matter of the poem. If this had helped Browning hold his handling of his themes smoothly and guaranteed that readers received them properly, Eliot's approach then may have gone beyond it and developed a more advanced strategy. In his dramatic monologues, the formal progression relies on complex allusions, intense images and abrupt juxtapositions, and he tries to hold them together by virtue of other complementary devices that the modernistic trends made available for him or devices that he himself skillfully developed.

The second difference is related to the auditor. In Browning's dramatic monologues, the auditor is very clearly present, and the reader's awareness of this other mind leads to a sense of the actuality of the external world. However, in Eliot's monologues, the main virtue lies in the degree of internality they project. They introduce the reader directly into the psyche of the persona, so that we can perceive the significant self. In the form of the interior monologue, which Eliot practiced extensively, no auditor is assumed, and this device makes for unique levels of depth, and of shocking actuality.

The two men also differ in their use of allusions. In Browning's dramatic monologues, any implicit messages sent to readers are easily decoded because the words the characters speak have, almost always, conspicuous indications of their time and place and circumstances. Indirect allusions are usually recognized by the footnotes he provided to his poems.

With Eliot, it is a well-known fact that he, too, provided notes, as is the case with his famous footnotes to *The Waste Land*. However, his allusions are not merely indications of the speaker's knowledge; they reflect the speaker's emotions in images. One has only to pick up one of these myriad literary allusions to see how Eliot makes it work; they are in fact not ambiguous or confused, but they have – in fact – far reaching bearings. The task of interpreting their implications is absolutely that of the reader. Take, for example, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. In it, there are plenty of allusions. We read, for instance, lines from Dante's *Inferno*, references to Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*, a title from Hesiod, a phrase from *Twelfth Night*, an allusion to John the Baptist, a quotation from Chaucer, and a reference to Hamlet. All of these incongruous elements are woven into the poem in such a manner as to invest the speaker's monologue with unusual depth and richness, perhaps, "in order to ruffle his readers" (Longenbach: 177-8).

The fourth difference lies in the way the two poets make their characterization. In Browning's monologues, personas are usually sketched as independent, individual characters, and each poem has its own dimensions. This is usually true of his poetry where a gradual buildup of a character outside one single poem is infrequent and perhaps a rarity. With

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Eliot, the contrary is noticeable. In many of his poems, characters are related to each other in a way that may contribute to making a unified emotional entity. Sometimes, Eliot introduces different characters through whom he renders the same themes and conveys them via the same images.

**VI. The Similarities**

Nonetheless, those differences – though remarkably essential – do not conceal the fact that the two poets are similar in several aspects. With Browning, the dramatic monologue "offer some of the most remarkable character sketches in Victorian literature – chances for characters to step forward and tell their stories, to represent themselves in words," and to "display an endlessly dynamic process of subjectivity in discourse" (Peltason, 1999: 315 and 361).

Exactly along the concepts of this context, Eliot's dramatic monologues have different characters and a range of different voices that do not allow the reader to identify the speaker with the poet. The use of masks, as Carter and McRae indicate, allows Eliot – as is the case with Browning – to "explore the human soul without the soul-searching being too directly personal" (Carter and McRae, 1997: 325). This is a strategy that distances Eliot from the subjective style, which is so important for him in his endeavour to keep – as I mentioned earlier – the broadest possible gap between Eliot the person and Eliot the poet. However, this endeavour has not always been successful. His poems, *Journey of the Magi* and *A Song for Simeon*, have "exercises in Browningsque dramatic Monologues," and speak to his desire "to exchange the symbolic fluidity of the psychological lyric for a more traditional dramatic form" (Bush, 2007).

If these two poems have clear Browningsque touches, they are not the only examples. In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the very first line, "Let us go then, you and I," sound entirely Browningsque: Eliot sets out, as it is conspicuously observable, to work out patterns similar to those which Browning uses in his dramatic monologues, "with time, place, and revealing situation conscientiously set forth through the character's speech" (Schneider, 1975: 24).

A second Browningsque feature is obvious in *Portrait of a Lady*, where we have three successive scenes: the form and progression of the poem appear to be well adapted to the dramatic situation and the exposition of the dramatic conflict. The poem involves a kind of mask or disguise to project a point of view, as the poet feels he "must borrow every changing shape / To find expression ..."

He also does a similar thing in *The Hollow Men*, as he wants to "... wear / Such deliberate disguises", a matter which immediately calls to the mind Robert Browning's use of the *Dramatic Personae*.

In *The Waste Land*, the speaker expresses himself through many masks, which compose a sort of multiple dramatic monologue, or a series of related monologues. Each of them reveals separate aspects of the sterility theme, and each of which is meant to cohere, the poet tells us in his notes, to the vision of Tiresias, "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (Eliot, 1922). The characters of the poem are placed in a context of all time. They present both "the misery of daily routine and the terror of emptiness as part of a larger horror" (Gish, 1981: 3). Moreover, there are different conceptions of time in this poem. We have time as succession, an

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endless flow without conclusion. He takes up the form of the dramatic monologue, and reassembles it to suit his own epic purpose. In spite of his modifications, we do not find a radical alteration of the form: the structure of *The Waste Land* cannot be fully understood without reference to the conventions of the dramatic monologue.

**VII. Conclusion**

Although Eliot's preference for dramatic monologue was consistent with his poetic theories, it is obvious that he took up the form that gave him the avenue into modernism. In this context, therefore, we could understand that he made changes, and he made new inroads in the technique. Nevertheless, this is a quite different story: it is true that he did not use the dramatic monologue in the precise manner of Browning, but at the end, he only made variations on the form he inherited from his predecessors so that it would suit his own poetic vision. Besides, the alteration is not radical, for Browning's tradition is visible throughout his early poetry, which constitutes an attempt to objectify thought and feeling. It is to this purpose that he puts on, especially in his early poems, an ironic mask or attitude, expressing a mood, or feeling, often by dramatic means.

Moreover, Eliot has talked of impersonality and the use of "objective correlatives": the dramatic monologue, because it is a means of adopting a mask, is a successful vehicle for objectification. Eliot has deplored the "dissociation of sensibility" in modern culture: the dramatic monologue, by virtue of being a form capable of focusing on idiosyncrasy, provided him with a means of dealing with a conflict of a neurotic victim of modern culture like Prufrock. Various techniques and concepts, which appealed to Eliot – precision of language, the particular perspective, the stream-of-consciousness technique, and the inner workings of the individual mind – could all be absorbed within the framework of the dramatic monologue. This is exactly what Eliot proceeded to do in his early poetry, and in his hands, the dramatic monologue became a live and vital form. Nonetheless, his monologues have added much to the tradition inherited from those of Browning's.

Eliot said that Prufrock was in part a man of about forty and in part himself (Gordon, 1977: 45). Besides, as he uses the notion of the split personality, it is interesting to observe that the demarcation between fiction and autobiography fits neatly along the lines of Prufrock's divided self. Eliot more obviously identifies with Prufrock's other self: the prophet obliged to articulate what he alone knows, the solitary thinker who wishes to ask an "overwhelming question" even as he wishes to establish rapport with a lady at a late afternoon tea-party.

To conclude, I may suggest that one cannot rule out the fact that, in his later poetry, Eliot tried to transcend the Browninesque conventions. He made, for example, major variations, at the forefront of which is the development of the interior monologue, the significance of which lies in the introduction of the reader directly and without authorial intervention into the psyche of his persona (Bolgan, 1973: 96). He also made another significant variation, which is reflected, in his use of the interior monologue in a form nearer to the stream-of-consciousness technique. By so doing, he extended the possibilities of the dramatic monologue in that the pattern is established

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by what goes on within the mind rather than by the exterior events. Based upon this, it can be stated that, after his major poems in which he invested the dramatic monologue, Eliot no longer needed the technique. Nevertheless, I may state here – yet in stronger terms – that this is true only because he successfully experimented in the form.

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