

Books of the Beginnings. The Emergence of the Idea of Literature in V. S. Naipaul's *A Writer's People*

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The article is an attempt at answering the question how and why the individuals born in social contexts in which strong traditions of literacy are absent come to nurture literary aspirations. The answer is based on the autobiographical essay *A Writer's People* by the Nobel prize winner born in Trinidad, V. S. Naipaul. He narrates the circumstances of his discovery of literature, in strong connection with the literary activity of his contemporary living on a nearby island, Derek Walcott, as well as his own father. Naipaul's further musings on the conditions of success and failure in literature lead him to analyse the milieus in which he was involved in England, as well as various minor and major texts of Indian and universal literature. As a conclusion, he points out at the gap between the pioneering and the derived, secondary texts written as an imitation of someone else's work. Also, the link between the original writing and the private, deeply felt realities is accentuated.

I am a descendant of East-European serfs. In spite of the so called “organic work” performed by Polish intelligentsia all over the 19th and the 20th centuries, I have been born into a bookless home. My great-grandmother was illiterate. My grandmother, working as a nurse, must have known how to read and write, to some degree, since she would have to decipher the names of different drugs, and perhaps even the doctors' cryptically scribbled notices. But I never saw her reading any book. Actually, she had just a single volume in her possession, a collection of kitchen recipes *Kuchnia polska (Polish cuisine)*, thick like a Bible, that used to provoke my mother's great envy. Of course, the women in my family, overcharged with chores, never cooked by the book. Nonetheless, the rarely opened volume epitomised a sheer possibility of a more sophisticated, “cultured” living. This is why it was such a prized possession. The cookbook, as I say, was thick like a Bible, but we had no Bible at home. My mother was a teacher at a primary school, but still, the fact did not imply anything. Using books at school was one thing; letting them in to her intimacy was quite another. She had almost no books of her own, and equally no habits of private reading. From my earliest childhood, I remember just a single volume belonging to her: a cheap edition of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, translated from English back into the writer's native tongue, i.e. Polish. Any of her colleagues or friends, one of those who belonged to the traditional, hereditary class of intelligentsia, must have given her that book as a birthday present. My mother did not know what to do with it; I suppose it never occurred to her that she might read it. Years later, the fragile spine of the book still unbroken, she was about to burn it in a cast-iron stove. Surreptitiously, I saved *Lord Jim* from the conflagration and still keep it in my possession as a sort of relic.

The years went by. Eastern Europe entered the European Union and the economic growth made our access to all sorts of material possessions incomparably easier. Yet a recent survey realised by the National Library has stated that only 1% of people in Poland declare the possession of a home library containing at least 500 books¹. Strikingly, this is the situation in a region where since the 19th century books, especially those written in national tongues, have been treated almost as holy relics, symbols of identity, resistance, communitarian cause. As I had been taught since my earliest childhood, it was a sacrilege to destroy them. Nonetheless, the rituals of reading, let alone writing them, remained limited to the thinnest layer of the society. This is why, musing on how rare are such items as books in the intimate worlds of contemporary Europeans, I start to wonder how it was possible that, over the span of two or three generations, books and writers appeared in remote corners of the globe. How is it that the wandering literature written by people who did not even speak English as their native tongue, exactly as that Joseph Conrad of my mother's, has ever managed to take root? My mother did not even know how to open that miserable *Lord Jim* she got for her birthday! What about other people's mothers and fathers, in such remote places as, let's say, the archipelago of Trinidad and Tobago? How did they come to have any ideas about literature?

Such activities as reading and writing do not belong to the universal sphere of human instinctive behaviours. They are the appanage of global minorities. The question how and why the idea they might read and even write books ever occurs to new readers and writers, those who were not lucky enough to receive libraries and the challenge of enriching them simply from their ancestors is a fascinating one. As a scholar belonging to the category of first generation readers and authors, I might be uniquely qualified to venture into this kind of reflection and to perceive fully its affective valency. This is why I find it useful to evoke those personal recollections before engaging into the scholarly interpretation of *A Writer's People. Ways of Looking and Feeling*, a non-fiction book published by a British writer born in Trinidad and the winner of the Nobel Prize in 2001, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. Global backgrounds of slavery, serfdom and exclusion may provide a criss-crossing illumination of vital reasons why the idea of literature may acquire an importance, transforming subaltern destinies and providing them with deeper significance.

A Writer's People. Ways of Looking and Feeling is an insightful, deeply personal text evoking various, often unobvious dimensions of poignancy and pathos. As an old man well in his seventies, having lived almost all his adult life in England, Naipaul revisits his origin and his modest beginnings among the Indian diaspora of the Caribbean. Among the writers he read early in his life, two are particularly important: Derek Walcott and his own father. The ways how the three of them managed to find their way to the very idea of literary expression, let alone any form of recognition in the literary world, are far from obvious. Certainly, none of them inherited either a home library or a ready-made idea of contributing to it with his own writing. Naipaul's subsequent encounters with people who did have libraries at their homes were deeply insightful and thought-provoking. What may strike the reader of his memories is the self-assurance with which he deals with such situations, his ability to see also the negative sides of growing up in a world saturated with literature, just as it was the case of his British colleagues and friends.

¹ Cf. Biblioteka Narodowa, "Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2022 roku", <https://www.bn.org.pl/raporty-bn/stan-czytelnictwa-w-polsce> [access: 27.06.2022].

Even if Naipaul shows so few signs of an inferiority syndrome, it is easy to imagine that bookless private histories are full of gaps and omissions, as well as things deliberately concealed. Revisiting the beginnings of his own individual life, as well as collective destinies of the Caribbean and India, Naipaul offers a unique insight into the birth of an appetite for books that is not entirely the result of cultural and intellectual assimilation or the will of imitating the colonizers. His testimony is sincere, painstaking, at many moments strident. It cannot avoid sounding controversial. Why, after all, should servants, serfs, and slaves require books?

In Naipaul's recollections, the discovery of the idea of literature appears in 1949, when he is a teenager, a schoolboy. This is when he hears about another young boy from one of the smaller islands who has published a book of poems. The case is an absolute novelty: "We had never had news like this before, not about a new book of poetry or about any kind of book" (2008: 5). The fact that such unusual tidings get any attention whatsoever is due to a peculiar coincidence of local politics and ambitions. The man who made the fame of Derek Walcott on the island of Trinidad was a certain Alberto Gomes, a man nurturing aspirations of political leadership. He had a column in the local newspaper *Sunday Guardian*, where he mentioned the new poet from St. Lucia. The idea of having a "culture" (Naipaul confesses having grown to hate the word) is by no means born among servants, serfs, and slaves. The writer has no doubt about it:

Many who looked for this kind of comfort were actually the better-off, middle class and higher, in various ways racially mixed, in good jobs, but with no strong racial affiliation (...). But now they had begun to suffer in their jobs and in their persons from what, with their success, they saw more clearly as colonial disrespect. They were no longer content to hide, to be grateful for small mercies; they wanted more for themselves. (7)

What Naipaul considers typical for such small colonial places as his own island is the existence of small groups of people who used to read and write as a form of colonial mimicry; he qualifies them pitilessly as "harmless pools of vanity" (6). Yet the way from those vague aspirations of getting "more" to the full capacity of literary creation was certainly long and arduous. Especially for someone like Naipaul, who had a Hindi-speaking background. As he recalls, "English was a language we were just coming into" (9). Incipient mastery of the tongue came together with a total lack of home library. Just like in the Polish case I've mentioned, the absence of books was only partially caused by the objective economic incapacity of acquiring them. At the distance of many decades, Naipaul analyses the reasons why he did not buy the volume of poetry he heard about. In 1949, the tiny booklet of Walcott's poetry, the equivalent of two cinema tickets, wasn't very cheap, but it wasn't out of his pecuniary possibilities either. The reasons why not to buy such a book was cultural rather than economic: "If English was something we were just coming to, this kind of book-buying was something we were as yet very far from" (10). It was perceived as an extravagance. The result is that Naipaul gets his own copy and actually reads Walcott's *25 Poems* only many years later, when he is already in England, working for the BBC radio station *Caribbean Voices*. His contact with the poet from one of the islands closest to his own takes place thousands of miles away, in a milieu dominated by English men of culture: all of them very well-read and many of them nurturing their own literary ambitions. The encounter of two islander writers is thus unavoidably distorted and re-shaped by the tastes and ideas circulating in the metropolis.

In his memories, Naipaul dedicates a great attention to difficulties, obstacles, and finally the failure of a majority of those people who wanted to distinguish themselves in literature. It is thus a powerful paradox that it is Walcott who succeeds to “break away from the social and racial and intellectual limitations of the island” (17), a minor social and economic reality that Naipaul compares with Ibsen’s Norway, only to show how many things that were missing in the Caribbean Ibsen’s Norway actually had. He tries to understand what kind of factors played in favour of the poet from St. Lucia, even if his life was by no means all sunshine and rainbows. In fact, his international fame rescued him from a rather unsatisfactory existence on the islands, where Naipaul met him in 1960 and 1965, when he was still employed at a local Sunday newspaper: “it would have been humiliating for him to be bossed around by people he saw as his inferiors, in what was still a colonial setting” (19). He is very realistic and down-to-earth, forcing the reader to understand how many years of misery separate literary creation from international visibility and recognition.

As the essayist sees it, returning to Walcott’s poems after fifty years, the greatness of the poet consisted in paying attention to many things we usually take for granted. In Naipaul’s view, Walcott was the inventor of “the idea of island beauty”, quite a revolutionary concept in colonial times: “It was an overturning of old sensibility, old associations. Until then the islands were thought of as ancient plantations, places of the lash” (21). It is quite interesting to observe that before the invention of mass tourism many of today’s paradise islands were seen as the ideal location for penal colonies. The idea of their beauty, as obvious as it might seem, is a relatively recent invention.

What is more, Walcott managed to break away from what Naipaul calls “spiritual emptiness” related to painful, silenced past, the suffering that never found its place in literature of any kind. This is why, as Naipaul says, “the spiritual emptiness was a problem for everyone from the plantation territories who wanted to write. Many were destroyed or silenced by it” (24). What forms a sharp, almost tragic contrast with the literary success and recognition of Walcott is the story of Naipaul’s father. Seepersad Naipaul wrote only a handful of stories in which he also tried to include an idea of beauty of some kind. On the other hand, he tried to avoid his miserable personal story of a little boy abandoned by his own father. He lived in a cultural context that wasn’t ripe for autobiography. Any evocation of personal misery in a country with such a history of cruelty would invite mockery. As Naipaul concludes, his father couldn’t achieve any kind of literary success, because he was born into a milieu in which certain inherited paradigms were missing: “There was no tradition of Indian writing or colonial writing or confessional writing into which my father might have been received. And all the pain of his early life, the material that in another society might have been his making as a writer, remained locked away” (34). The literature of servants, serfs, and slaves remained beyond the horizon.

A Writer’s People is an essay divided in five parts. Only the first part is dedicated to Naipaul’s native region. In the second one, he performs a daring dissection of the literary aspirations and shortcomings of the people whom he encountered in England. Their predicament is of quite a different nature. They don’t hurt themselves against the lack of tradition, but on the contrary, against an excess of it. They live in a reality that had already been written about; any new book is forcibly a repetition or a variation on what that had already been said. This is why he even coins specific terms to describe this situation, speaking of the “over-literate” and “over-written-about” societies. The writer of whom Naipaul speaks more at length in this chapter is his close friend Anthony Powell. In the England to which Naipaul comes – and in which Powell is born –, it is extremely difficult to become original keeping

one's literary work close to one's home; this is precisely the predicament of his English friend: "Many great writers in the past had stayed with their society (...). The Dickens who mattered had stayed in England. Tolstoy was at his best in Russia, and Balzac was at his best in France. But these writers were all pioneers, writing about what hadn't been written before. By 1930, when Tony was beginning, very little about these great European societies had been left unsaid" (62). Powell writes of the bombs falling over England during the Second World War – hardly a novel or original subject, even in the 1950s and 1960s. What is more, just as the aspirant *littérateurs* of Trinidad were lacking confidence, Powell succumbs to the overconfidence and vanity of a successful author, "as of a man who felt he had made it, and could now do no wrong, could now like a practised magician pull his old comic characters out of his hat and feel he had to do no more" (37). Obviously, not a good recipe to create great literature.

In any case, in Naipaul's opinion, there is no easy literary life for those who were lucky enough to inherit social and material privilege, who had been schooled to become brilliant, intelligent, original. Naipaul reaches the conclusion that there is no such thing as a perfectly just republic of letters "where – as in an antechamber to a fairly judged afterlife of reputation or neglect, and in the presence of a literary St. Peter – all bring their work and all are equal. That idea of equality is of course false. Every kind of writing is the product of a specific historical and cultural vision" (41). Every writer's path is full of its own, peculiar thorns. Finally, remembering the case of his father once again, he reaches an ominous conclusion: "It is hard to be the first. It is probably harder to come near the end" (64).

Overall, in his essay (written, as we know, when he was already a Nobel Prize winner and a man in his seventies), Naipaul is by no means a diffident aspirant from Trinidad. On the contrary, he is very critical, almost insolent about British cultural milieu. Obviously, he is not quite someone "co-opted by metropolitan values and tastes" as he had sometimes been seen in older criticism (Gorra, 1997: 4)². What is particularly striking, he mentions repeatedly how little he had learned about literature at the university: "At my collage they were for the most part provincial and mean and common" (Naipaul, 2008: 49). The statement is rather surprising, taking into consideration that Naipaul, having come to England on a scholarship in 1950, studied at University College, Oxford, i.e. the oldest college of the world-leading institution, founded in 1249 by William of Durham. The antiquity and splendour of the place did not hush the young Trinidadian's critical opinions. Later on in his essay, he explains: "I don't, properly speaking, have a past that is available to me, a past I can enter into and consider; and I grieve for that lack" (73). He did not, however, succumb to the temptation of making the English past his own, of "entering into" University College and considering it his own ever since. Perhaps the true reason is that Oxford was, quite inversely, a place that succumbed to the same vanity he saw in Powell, a corporation persuaded that it had made it and had to do no more, seeing no need to reach beyond its own prestige.

It is thus easy to admit (just as Fawzia Mustafa, one of the early critics and biographers of Naipaul did) that the literary resilience of the writer is related to his ability of remaining colonial: "His career takes on an aura of a mission whose goal has been to find a way to make one part of the world readable to another" (Mustafa, 1995: 1). Nonetheless, even moving in

² It is, however, quite significant that Naipaul managed to harmonize himself with the British literary life to such a degree that in 1984 he appeared, together with Anthony Powell, in a monographic presentation of the English novel, with relatively little attention paid to his origin and colonial background (Swinden, 1984).

those distant, exotic worlds, he still struggles against the curse of things “over-written-about”. He confessed his predicament already in an essay written in 1974, *Conrad’s Darkness*: “In my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where, untrammelled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer... And I found that Conrad – sixty years before, in the time of a great peace – had been everywhere before me” (Naipaul, 1974).

In spite of those predicaments, becoming a writer, almost a hopeless, tragic destiny indelibly marked by despondency and failure, is the only way of life worth living. One might be under the impression that any of Naipaul’s confessions begins *in media res*, because the ambition of writing is already there, since the very beginning, as a given. The despondency of his life “sixteen years later, in London” (2008: 4) that he mentions in the opening section of his book was already provoked by the burning fire of aspiration. Even if Naipaul’s early novels acquire an unpretentious, comic tone, the laughter lays bare a deeply hidden pain: the hero of his first book published in 1957, *Ganesh*, is already a frustrated writer whose books do not sell well enough to keep his marriage alive; this is why he chooses a more promissory career of a religious healer mentioned in the book’s title, *The Mystic Masseur*. Just as Cristina Emanuela Dascălu remarked, “Naipaul’s novels seem to wind in and out of the different cultural positions that are available to a young man of his ethnicity and social position, seeing them as insufficient. The one role that Naipaul truly does recognize as worthwhile is that of the writer, the writer who makes a concerted difference to the cultures he represents and the writer who can transcend the poverty of present-day identity politics” (Dascălu, 2007: 6).

Let’s return to the analysis of *A Writer’s People*. The importance of the “concerted difference” comes to the fore when Naipaul switches to India in the third part of his essay, trying to follow the glance of Aldous Huxley fixed on the figure of Gandhi speaking at the Indian National Congress in Kanpur in 1925. He also observes Gandhi as an incipient author (not quite in the literal sense, since he dictated his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* to a secretary, Mahadev Desai). The figure of Gandhi and his autobiography appears a little bit as a compensation of the fact that Naipaul didn’t manage to get access to a story he would be much more curious to know: the memories of a mattress-maker employed by his mother. He had hoped to hear about the “private India” where his people had come from, yet all in vain. His curiosity was to remain unsatisfied. He lingers thus with Huxley and Gandhi, finding that precious, pioneering quality he searches for in literature, so often in vain: “The Gandhi who had presented himself to Huxley and the Kanpur Congress was iconic (the word can’t be avoided) and complete, someone who might have been thought to be perfectly Indian, always there. But the emaciated small man in a dhoti with a shawl over his bare shoulders was a creation; he had been created step by step, personal experiment by personal experiment – in London, South Africa, and India – over thirty years; and the book he was dictating (...) was the story of that creation” (102). The comparison of this autobiography with that of Nehru shows once again the main problem with which Naipaul grapples in his essay: the difference between originality and derivation, the first, pioneering book that opens the way and the book or books that follow.

The fourth part of Naipaul’s essay is just as daring and irreverent as his previous comments concerning the University of Oxford. Now, after bringing to the limelight the despondency and failure of all those minor writers of Trinidad, India, and English newspapers’ editorial offices where he had worked, Naipaul goes for the greatest, such as Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbô*. Once again, the personal circumstances interfering with literature

occupy an important place. Naipaul confesses having read *Madame Bovary* not in a careful, critical edition that might proudly stand on the bookshelves of the privileged people; he had just an abbreviated school edition. Coming back to the the great novel many years later, he still reads only fragments of it; other passages remain in the shadow. His perception is hindered and incomplete, yet the very fact leads him to repeated surprises; he constantly discovers new aspects of the plot. Yet the incompleteness, either of his material or his competences as a reader, does not make him in the least bashful. He is in search of “the idea of a master’s quality” (125) that lies deeper than any special stylistic quality or literary rhythm. What he calls the “writer’s writing” – as opposed to all other kinds of text-producing activity – is based on a personal factor, not the reproduction of ideas. This is why the writer’s fate is a condition of eternal dissatisfaction and despondency. And, especially in *Salammbó*, Naipaul discovers once again the supreme danger of self-satisfaction that awaits all the writers. Just like Powell, Flaubert falls into his own trap: his tone, at the end of the book, “is self-congratulatory. He is pleased with the operatic story he has added to Polybius, and pleased especially with the way he has made it end. But his story, shallow, never convincing, always a fabrication, seemingly derivative, undermines the greater labour of the book: the historical superstructure, the too-careful attempt to reconstruct the topography and architecture and religion of Carthage. It is a dreadful misjudgement” (145). Once again, Flaubert’s case (with the gap that Naipaul notices between *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbó*) illustrates the story of a first book, the only one truly destined to immortality, and the book that follows.

Is it his colonial origin or, on the contrary, his Oxonian education that makes Naipaul so audacious and irreverent in his criticism? Perhaps precisely the conjunction of both. This is particularly visible when he glides quite effortlessly from Flaubert’s Polybius right into Virgil’s *Aeneid* and some minor poems added at the end of the two-volume Loeb edition. One of them is *Moretum*, where he finds a despised, marginalised figure of a black African female slave called Scybale – a name which, as someone more advanced in classical languages than himself makes him observe –, signifies dung or manure: “So the poor African woman slave was named for what she was thought to work in; she became ‘Miss Manure’; horrible, this insult lodged in a beautiful idyll” (158). Certainly, many people with Oxonian education had read this poem; yet it needed someone with a colonial origin to pay due attention to this detail.

The closing part of Naipaul’s essay takes the reader back to India once more, and the problem of repetition is illustrated with the figure of Vinoba Bhave, who in 1950s tried to come forth as a new Gandhi. Of course, to no avail. The unique, personal style of the great leader couldn’t be copied by someone else. But there is more to say about it. Among the elements that had made Gandhi inimitable Naipaul pays attention to such a factor as cultural incompetence that Gandhi had experienced in London and then in South Africa. The formative value of ignorance was forged into the seal of authenticity. It contrasts, as Naipaul goes on, with yet another individual and textual case, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* of Nirad Chaudhuri and his pretension of high scholarship: “the wish to display knowledge and settle the accounts with the world” (174). The fact that the pretentious Indian author managed to make himself a reputation in England is perhaps one of those moments illuminating Naipaul’s discredit of the academic milieu in general and the University of Oxford in particular. How easily it can be fooled! A single image he describes permits to seize a lot with just one glance: “I saw a photograph of him in his Oxford days: sitting contentedly in an armchair, an Indian regency figure, dwarfish and shrunken and elderly, in a rucked shirt. At the other pole from the half-naked Gandhi, fifty-six years old, in his made-up Indian costume,

whom Aldous Huxley saw at the Indian National Congress in Kanpur in 1925. Two solutions to the same problem: fitting one civilisation to another” (186).

The eternal issue of the secondary and the derived coming so quickly after the auroral moment of originality, as well as the occasional triumph of the pretentious over the authentic, is unsolvable. As Naipaul has revealed quite in the beginning of his essay, it is the universe of childhood that gives one’s first book, even if the book is actually written in a darker, despondent world, later on in one’s life. Yet not the universe of childhood alone, not just Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, and the privacy of the verandah in Woodbrook street; rather the complexity resulting from all the subsequent changes of perspective. As he says in the introductory sequence of his essay: “All my life I have had to think about ways of looking and how they alter the configuration of the world” (4). Meanwhile, at the end of his book Naipaul deplores the state of the present-day Indian literature that seems made of single books: “one writer, one book” (187), just because these novels are so strictly autobiographical and every author has just one family to write about. So, when his or her domestic story is told, there is no place for anything more. Meditating on the creative power of those auroral moments, Naipaul reveals that he is not an author of absolute beginnings. Even if his father’s writing brought him no fame, it created a ground. Born as early as 1932, Naipaul belongs already to the second generation of writing in Trinidad. In his recollections he marks the distinctness of his situation that gave him a quick start: “from about the age of seven I saw my father writing his stories. This meant that from an early age I began to inhabit a distinct mental world – distinct from the rest of the island, and distinct even from the rest of my mother’s extended family” (45).

Certainly, there is a distance created by the act of writing in relation to any author’s domestic reality. It creates a gap that may cause individual tragedies, just as my own. With my newly acquired library and bookish aspirations, I was rejected by my bookless family. My mother built up an idea that books contain errors, and I was living according to this unnamed error, instead of plying to the cultural norms of my social milieu. In comparison, I might say that Naipaul’s fate in Trinidad was relatively clement. As he confesses, his mother did not read his books, but at least she acknowledged them. Nonetheless, those deep familiar roots from which literature takes its substance are cut at a moment or another, the circuit is broken. Naipaul recollects his first diary which he tried to keep at the age of nine or ten, and its dreadful affectation and falseness, especially as it stands against the blurred, yet so deeply authentic image of his grandmother whose fate was destined to oblivion: “A photograph, just one, imprecise and out of focus, as though it is this woman’s fate to be unknown, helps a little with the face, but only a little. It shows, imperfectly, a fatigued old woman with a big nose, someone made ugly by her unhappy life. No finer quality can be made out, no sparkle in the eye, no pleasure at being photographed; this tired old woman just looks” (74).

As I read this recollection of a Trinidadian writer, I cannot abstain from musing on my own grandmother, the underpaid, overstrained, underqualified nurse of peasant origin, employed at a military hospital in Eastern Poland. Just like my serf ancestors, she has left me without a private history of any kind. The life of my people has never been included in literature, in spite of those many attempts made by the writers coming from Polish intelligentsia, who were essentially alien to our world and could not penetrate to the core of our experience. In spite of all the abundance of Polish peasant literature, I can’t think of a single volume that I might intimately identify as telling our story, just as Naipaul could not find any trace of the mattress-maker’s experience. It was a gap that maintained him unsatisfied and despondent, in spite of his Nobel Prize and all the honours, till his old age. The private India

he and his people had left behind – just like the rural world of Poland my own people – remains an enigma. An abyss of unnarrated pain from where new pioneering books are still to emerge. A promise of a literature to come.

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