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Afterword: Modernism, Formalism, and the "Edwardian Bypass"

Adrian Hunter

1 In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf makes a disquieting prediction about women's writing:

> I do not want, and I am sure that you do not want me, to broach that very dismal subject, the future of fiction, so that I will only pause here one moment to draw your attention to the great part which must be played in that future so far as women are concerned by physical conditions. The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be. Again, the nerves that feed the brain would seem to differ in men and women, and if you are going to make them work their best and hardest, you must find out what treatment suits them. (117)

2 It is, as the critic Mary Eagleton points out, a statement at once attractive and repellent: attractive because it offers to "recognise women's social experience in our culture and where that may take them in their writing"; repellent because of its suggestion that short stories might be "about all that women can manage," given the twin burdens of unstable temperament and maladaptive physiology Woolf thinks they carry (66). The question Eagleton asks is whether it is possible to conceive of a relationship between gender and the short story genre that escapes this kind of essentialism.

3 It is a good question, but one that short story scholarship has shown surprisingly little interest in answering in the quarter-century since Eagleton posed it. While the "cultural turn" in literary studies may have transformed understanding of the novel in the intervening years, the short story has, for the most part, remained captive to a strangely unregenerate formalism. By and large, the standard works of criticism are still those of the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties: Charles E. May's *New Short Story Theories* (1994); Susan Lohafer's *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (1983) and *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989); John Gerlach's *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in*

the American Short Story (1985); Clare Hanson's *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980* (1985); and Dominic Head's *The Modernist Short Story: a study in theory and practice* (1992). There are encouraging signs that this situation is beginning to alter—one thinks of Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell's *The Postcolonial Short Story* (2013), for example, or Ann-Marie Einhaus's *The Short Story and the First World War* (2013); yet it remains the case that short story criticism has registered only a fitful engagement with Feminism, Marxism, Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, Ecocriticism, Book History, and other theories of note. A recent collection of essays (Patea) is representative of the concerns still largely animating the discipline: pragmatism, defining the short story, the relationship to the novel, closure, cognitive approaches to "storyness," Poe and his legacy, metafictionality and postmodern experimentation, reader response theory. Taken singly, many of the individual chapters in *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First Century Perspective* are exemplary works of critical close reading; but taken as a *field*, they suggest stasis and a curious self-circumscription on the part of scholars.

4 If this is true of short story criticism in general, it is particularly so in respect of studies addressing the modernist period. In his landmark book *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (1992), Dominic Head describes the short story as the "distilled essence" (6) of modernist narrative theory and practice, a claim that has enjoyed widespread acceptance since, and which has served to maintain the attention of critics on a fairly narrow repertoire of formal characteristics—closure, the epiphany, free indirect discourse, and point of view principal among them. Modernism and the short story are unproblematically and unquestioningly aligned with one another: modernism is defined in terms of an experimental, self-conscious formalism, and so, straightforwardly enough, is the short story. The result has been a continuing focus on a small handful of writers—Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, Hemingway—whose sole qualification for inclusion is that their work is taken to be definitionally modernist in the formalist sense. Wider questions of the sort Janet Beer raises about Virginia Woolf go largely unremarked, despite the fact that Woolf is everywhere discussed in connection with the modernist short story.

5 One of the virtues of the so-called "new modernist studies" as exemplified by the likes of Ann Ardis, John Xiros Cooper, Nicholas Daly, Rita Felski, Aaron Jaffe, Sean Latham, and Mark Wollaeger, is that it draws attention to the peculiar distortions that formalism places on our view of early twentieth century literature. More precisely, it invites us to recognise how the privileging of form conspires in the belief that modernism was somehow "*the* aesthetic of modernity" (Ardis 115, emphasis in the original), the superordinate cultural, aesthetic, and ideological response to the experience of the modern. Ann Ardis dates the inauguration of the "new modernist studies" to the first meeting of the Modernist Studies Association, in October, 1999, and notes that the phrase was coined to characterize recent revisionist work that consciously departed from "New Criticism's more purely celebratory presentation of modernism" (13). The reference to New Criticism is significant, since one of the priorities of the "new modernist studies" has been to attack the idea of an autonomous and formally discrete modernist text. In many instances, this has meant uncovering the extent of modernism's complicity with the very conditions and phenomena it proposes to transcend—the market, for example, or popular cultural forms of mass mediation; but the "new modernist studies" is also willing to challenge the broader historicist

biases of institutional literary criticism by showing how these give rise to a peculiarly, even naively, modernist-centric view of the period.

6 This interanimation of history, form, and critical practice is neatly exemplified by Nicholas Daly's *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle* (1999), a book which, though historicist in intention, is inevitably drawn to discussing formalism as the principal means by which the record of early twentieth century writing has been shaped in modernism's image. Daly's study explores the many continuities that exist between, on the one hand, popular romance fiction and sensational literature of the 1890s, and, on the other, canonical works of high modernism (Eliot and Hemingway are among the writers he considers). The thrust of Daly's argument is that these continuities have been suppressed in the effort to establish modernism as the defining and superlative aesthetic of modernity. That the modernists themselves were eager to cast turn-of-the-century writers like Marie Corelli or Rider Haggard in the role of a phantasmagoric mass cultural "other" is no surprise; what is more telling for Daly is that subsequent literary criticism has perpetuated that belief. That it has done so reflects, Daly suggests, a literary-critical practice in thrall to ideas about modernity bequeathed by modernism itself. Scholars of the period suffer, he argues, from being too close to their subject, the disciplinary apparatus they deploy having been, to a large degree, *made* by that subject —bequeathed by modernism to an institutional practice it helped to create. The result has been the substitution of a "modernist literary history" for a "literary history of modernism" (122), a subtle but important distinction that points to the ways in which criticism has taken the protagonists of modernism at their own self-affirming word. Not for the sake of convenience, merely, did Hugh Kenner called it "the Pound Era": Pound would have called it that, too.

7 Ann Ardis makes an analogous case in respect of *fin de siècle* radical writing, arguing that modernists like Woolf reflexively denigrated and misrepresented the achievements of the earlier, 1890s avant-garde in order to carry off the myth of their own exceptionalism. Modernist self-definition, that is to say, arose not only in contra-distinction to the mass popular "other" (Daly's thesis), but by contrast with the preceding generation of experimental writers, whose achievements were systematically occluded, rejected, or, to use the term Ardis favors, "exiled." It is an argument that prompts us to ask fundamental questions about our own critical practice, and Ardis names some of them:

> how did modernism come to be perceived as the aesthetic of modernity? What other aesthetic or political agendas were either erased from cultural memory or thoroughly discredited as the literary avant-garde achieved cultural legitimacy and English studies charged itself with disciplinary credibility? How are the edges, the margins, and even the limitations of modernism revealed once we start paying attention to the ways this literary movement intersects with, borrows from, and reacts against other cultural enterprises? (7)

8 As Ardis explains, modernism's "most basic categories of analysis were stitched into the very fabric of English studies as a discipline as the latter established its professional credibility in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s" (79). Formalism supplied the instruction manual, as it were, to the modernist text, and was the principal means by which modernism's standing as *the* aesthetic of modernity came to be assured, and by which it has been perpetuated. While much has obviously changed in the discipline of English studies in the intervening decades, it remains the case, Ardis says, quoting Raymond Williams, that a "machinery of selective tradition" continues to operate through an

"apparatus of reviews, academic endorsements, curricular revision, etc., that enables a 'highly selected version of the modern' to stand in for 'the whole of modernity'" (79). We might add that if this is true of modernism as a whole, it is especially so of the short story.

9 The "new modernist studies" proposes to enlarge the territory, chronology, and even the very concept of modernism; at the same time, it draws attention to the institutional practices that define the field of study. In both these respects, it has the capacity to reinvigorate short story criticism, I suggest. To illustrate how (and in the interests of providing a forward-looking rather than retrospective "afterword" to this volume), I want to examine some aspects of the short story in the years immediately preceding the high tide of modernism, in what is referred to (in British history, at least), as the Edwardian era. While demonstrably a period of great productivity and inventiveness in short fiction, the years 1901-1910 lie largely buried in histories of the short story. If they serve a purpose at all, it is to support, by means of contrast, claims for modernist artistic and cultural pre-eminence. That is the use to which Virginia Woolf famously put the Edwardians in her essays "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" and "Modern Fiction," and a view from which subsequent generations of critics have seen little reason to depart. The relative invisibility of Edwardian short fiction has a great deal to tell us, I think, about the enthrallment of short story criticism to the modernist-formalist dyad, and so is a good place to begin a reflection on how scholarship might move forward from this point.

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10 According to the *Oxford Companion to Edwardian Fiction*, approximately eight hundred British and Irish writers published work of some note in the first decade of the twentieth century (Kemp ix); yet, for most students and many established scholars, those years, 1901-1910, remain *terra incognito.* Where Edwardianism is represented at all on course syllabi, it tends to be in the guise of E.M. Forster or, at a stretch, Ford Madox Ford. Arnold Bennett, meanwhile, though hugely influential in his day as a novelist and critic, is better known as the object of Virginia Woolf's belittlement than for anything he wrote. As David Trotter points out, such willful oversight is remarkable when we consider how much scholarly effort has gone into narrating the history of the period more broadly conceived, and, moreover, how much the social and cultural happenings of the Edwardian decade have to offer to the literary critic:

> The Edwardian period would seem to have quite a lot going for it, as a period. However it is defined, it is short, and not lacking in political and socio-economic excitements: National Insurance, suffragettes, an armaments race, the strange death of Liberal England. What more could one possibly want? And yet the feeling persists that, as far as the evolution of British culture is concerned, the Edwardian period was something of an interregnum, or pause for breath. Historiographically, a bypass connects the theme-park of fin de siècle decadence and renovation to the Modernist metropolis, and few commentators spare as much as a glance for the unprepossessing market town it carries them around [...]. Writers on Edwardian literary culture, in particular, often give the impression of having bitten off rather less than they can chew. (12)

11 As Trotter points out, so habitual has it become to take the "Edwardian bypass" that even a revisionist critic like Nicholas Daly is prepared to argue for a connection between popular romance writing of the 1890s and the later achievements of Eliot and

Hemingway that proceeds as though there were nothing in between. Nor does Daly apparently see any contradiction in attacking modernist hegemony while implicitly accepting the modernist view of the Edwardians as so many snobs, hacks, and materialists. Where the Edwardians are concerned, it seems that no amount of critical neglect is worth bothering about.

12 How to go about supplying this critical deficit? One way would be to argue for the inclusion of the Edwardians in the roster of early twentieth-century literary radicalism. Jefferson Hunter, in his excellent book on the period, suggests something of the sort in respect of the short story, which, he argues, was the scene of significant formal experimentation during the Edwardian years. Hunter's case in point is the so-called frame-tale, in which the reader is invited to "overhear" a story as it is told to a defined group of listeners by an identifiable speaker. Essentially an elaboration of the dramatic monologue, the form was widely utilized by Edwardian writers, and examples of it are to be found in mainstream as well as high-brow literary magazines of the day. According to Hunter, the attraction of the frame-tale lay in its amenability to psychological focalization, and in the general air of relativism that hung about it. As he explains, the frame-tale suited the Edwardian taste "for assimilating and perfecting the techniques of the past" while at the same time allowing them to "acknowledge, perhaps even to mourn, the passing of a particular kind of human simplicity" (28). It was a form that expressed scepticism and a "Paterian disinclination to take a cosmic or comprehensive view of things," as Wendell Harris elsewhere puts it (188), and as such it signalled a retreat from the simple authority of the storyteller into a complicated world of intersubjectivity. The Edwardians had "lost faith in wisdom as their fathers had lost faith in God," Hunter asserts, and with that hermeneutics of suspicion came a favoring of artistic forms capable of registering "ironies or psychological nuances" (29).

13 Hunter's reading chimes with the work of other scholars, myself included, who have identified proto-modernist stirrings in chronologically pre-modernist texts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Yet, there is a danger here in seeking to narrativize the achievements of the Edwardians by reference to the ideas of their modernist successors. To value the frame-tale largely because of its family resemblance to the higher emanations of modernist fictional practice is to risk further reinforcing the belief that modernism is the superordinate cultural discourse of modernity. Modernism, once again, stands as the measure by which we judge the worth of all writing. It is possible to start from a different, less biased and less defensive position, I think, by rejecting the idea of modernism as the yardstick, as "*the* canonical form of early twentieth-century literature" (Pykett 10) by which all else can be made to account. Doing so means setting aside the lenses modernism fashions for us and refusing the standards of evaluation it proposes. To stay with the frame-tale for a moment, instead of seeking to couple it to the canonical modernist text, we might instead consider its interest in orality and verbal performance as signifying a quite different, but nonetheless equally telling, response to the conditions of modernity. Furthermore, the sheer heterogeneity of uses to which the frame-tale is put in the Edwardian period—part of what has been called Edwardian "generic promiscuity" (Kemp et al. xvii)—can be thought of, not as a marker of frivolousness and superfluity, as modernism would have it, but as an expression of resistance to increasingly sclerotic and instrumentalist forms of literary realism.

14 Jefferson Hunter actually points us in this direction when he mentions Walter Benjamin's classic 1936 essay "The Storyteller." Hunter accepts the mournful implications of Benjamin's thesis, which are that print culture and the advent of modern technological society have broken the link between storytelling and what Benjamin calls "imaginative wisdom":

> We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings. (92)

15 Benjamin sees the characteristically modernist short story—elliptical, abbreviated, interrogative—as an aesthetic accommodation to the privations of technological modernity: it is the literary form appropriate to the time-harried commuters and impassive hoards swarming over London Bridge in T.S. Eliot's poem, a disaffected citizenry whose atomism takes textual form in the abandonment of "living speech" (86) and the slow, accretive communality of tale-telling. Benjamin is interested in those writers who respond to the scene of the modern in other ways, specifically through the recovery of what Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, citing the passage above, term "trace elements of the oral tradition" (1). The frame-tale, with its emphasis on orality, layering, and the intrigues of "living speech," can be seen as participating in the work of this alternative body of writing. Indeed, one of Benjamin's favored authors, Rudyard Kipling, was among the principal exponents of the frame-tale during the Edwardian period. Crucially, the function of orality in the work of these writers is not nostalgic or backward looking: modernism may *want* us to view it that way, of course (which is one reason why there is rarely any room at the modernist salon for Kipling), but Benjamin implies that access to orality might bespeak an alternative, oppressed, resistant strain of cultural expression that does not regard as either inevitable or triumphant the seemingly inevitable triumph of reason and capital. That is to say, rather than regarding the frame-tale's staging of voice as symptomatic of an emergent modernism (Jefferson Hunter's thesis), it becomes possible to trace the preoccupation with "living speech," framing, and the speaking subject to oral and folkloric roots, and, as Frederic Jameson would have it, to a rejection of the "threefold imperatives" of realist (and thus modernist) narration, *viz.* "depersonalization, unity of point of view, and restriction to scenic representation" (Jameson 90-91).

16 Benjamin's essay hints at how we might release the framed, "speakerly" narrative from the grip of modernist formalism, as a first step to taking Edwardian short fiction on its own terms rather than modernism's. As often with Benjamin, there is little empirical evidence to support the claims he makes, and for that reason "The Storyteller" does not offer a particularly robust ground on which to mount an historical and methodological revision of the sort I am proposing here. It is necessary to look elsewhere—to Frederic Jameson's account of the Romance aesthetic in his book *The Political Unconscious*, I suggest. While Jameson does not consider the frame-tale *per se,* or examine orality as part of his argument, his analysis of the "romance aesthetic" at the turn of the twentieth century provides a useful analogue to our discussion of the forms and functions of the frame-tale, and to the wider question of Edwardian "generic promiscuity" in the short story, to which I alluded earlier.

17 Jameson develops his definition of romance from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Romance for Frye is, as Jameson explains, "a wish-fulfilment, or Utopian fantasy which

aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced" (96). There is, note, no detachment from the real in Frye's understanding of the romance; rather, romance is lodged *in the real*, from where it sets about "*transforming* ordinary reality" (97). This matters to Jameson because it suggests that romance, far from fantasizing an escape from the world, seeks the exchange of an earthly reality for an earthly paradise; and it is this grounding in the here and now that gives the romance its covert political function. The representational forms that romance typically takes—oral tales, fairy tales, adventure stories, comic writing, melodramas—are all charged with this Utopian aspiration: they contain, as Jameson says, "the irrepressible voice and expression of the underclasses of the great systems of domination" (91).

18 Turning to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Jameson suggests that the reappearance of romance (his principal subject is Conrad, a prolific writer of frame-tales, of course) can be understood as a reaction against the "containment" or "reification" of realism by the irrepressible logic of late capitalism. He argues that where realism begins as an exhilarating and liberating mode of expression, it is, by the end of the nineteenth century, so reified (that is, systematized and subjected to reproduction) that it becomes part of the oppressive entailment of reason and capital to which it was once so potent a foil. Under these conditions, Jameson proposes, romance re-emerges to take up the call of Utopian desire and enact the symbolic transformation of everyday life:

> Let Scott, Balzac, and Dreiser serve as the non-chronological markers of the emergence of realism in its modern form; these first great realisms are characterized by a fundamental and exhilarating heterogeneity in their raw materials and by a corresponding versatility in their narrative apparatus. In such moments, a generic confinement to the existent has a paradoxically liberating effect on the registers of the text, and releases a set of heterogeneous historical perspectives—the past for Scott, the future for Balzac, the process of commodification for Dreiser—normally felt to be inconsistent with a focus on the historical present. Indeed, this multiple temporality tends to be sealed off and recontained again in "high" realism and naturalism, where a perfected narrative apparatus [...] begins to confer on the "realistic" option the appearance of an asphyxiating, self-imposed penance. It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakeably set in place. (90-91)

19 More concretely than Benjamin, Jameson gives us a way of thinking about the "generic promiscuity" of Edwardian short fiction, its fondness for fairy tale, orality, Utopian fantasy, and so on. Where realism has grown sclerotic and "asphyxiating," bound as it is to the reality principle, romance becomes the scene and source of "narrative heterogeneity" and imaginative possibility. At a stroke, Jameson dispatches the idea—very much a product of modernism's self-constructions—of romance as a nostalgic back-formation or recrudescence of antiquated cultural forms. Nor is it mere escapism. Rather, its very heterogeneity expresses a wish to transform, rather than succumb to, the relentless reification of the real entailed in the high-realist project. Modernism will, if anything, extend the work of reification in the form of a "perfected poetic apparatus" to match the "perfected narrative apparatus" of nineteenth century realism (280),

though it will also present Utopian compensations of its own. The point to note, however, is the structural equivalence between the romance and modernism as Jameson presents them: they are both the symbolic expressions of particular moments in the long process by which the subject is "culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system" (236). Crucially, modernism has no superior or prior claim to represent the experience of the modern, in Jameson's estimation; it is one phase, one aesthetic among others, and so is romance.

20 Returning to the particular case of the short story, Jameson's work can help us to revise our understanding of texts that the modernist-formalist paradigm would place outside of serious reckoning or any claim to significant modernity: texts like, for example, Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), or its sequel, *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), two sequences of fantasy stories that are presented in the form of frame-tales. Key to restoring such work to our account of early twentieth century short fiction would be, first of all, to reconsider the properties that the modernist-formalist view finds unacceptable in them; because, as Jameson shows, what is incommensurable to the dominant aesthetic discourses of modernism may be, in fact, precisely the things that make a text *significantly* modern—supposing, that is, that we are able to release our notion of the "modern" from moder*nism*'s grip. If we can do that, then what are customarily considered deficits in Edwardian conceptions of the novel and short story may come to be seen instead as the entailments of a different sort of response to the conditions of modernity, and perhaps, even, an active form of resistance to an emergent, proto-modernist aesthetic fetishization of fragmentation and alienation.

21 The same goes for the view that Edwardian "generic promiscuity" reflects a fundamental lack of seriousness or intellectual coherence. If we broaden our view and become scholars of this period rather than modernism's apologists, then we can see this heterogeneity as participating in a much larger process by which, just to isolate a couple of aspects, there is a fragmentation of markets and readerships, and the very category of "literature" itself is coming unstuck. Modernism participates in that process too, of course, but often in a reactionary way, as it attempts to stabilize the "literary" by artificially sharpening the differences between highbrow and lowbrow, for example. In the short stories of Kipling, Netta Syrett, Hugh Walpole, Charles Marriott, L.T. Meade, Edgar Wallace, and many others one could name, we see, by contrast, a remarkable degree of invention and stylistic playfulness—a heterogeneity that bespeaks vitality, if only we can move beyond the "dominant critical paradigms of literary value" (Ardis 123) that modernism imposes on the period.

22 Even if, at the end of the day, modernism remains central to our considerations, our account of it can be enlarged and enriched by our address to the Edwardian writers. Most students of the short story can find something to say about Joyce's *Dubliners*; what is less well known is that Joyce composed most of the stories in his collection between 1904 and 1907, well before the high tide of modernism. And what of Katherine Mansfield's *In a German Pension*, a text whose Edwardian trappings are a cause of some embarrassment to her modernist-minded readers? What, even, of Virginia Woolf, with whom we began? Very little has been written about her "generic promiscuity" as it was displayed in the stories she wrote for mass-market American magazines in the nineteen-thirties.

23 None of which is to suggest that there are not important and telling differences between the literary legacies of Edwardianism and modernism that we ought to be

concerned to study. We can go further than that, in fact, and concede to Woolf's claim that the Edwardians were, unlike their modernist successors, largely content to recycle the conventions of the classic realist Victorian novel; that they published countless exercises in the sub-Dickensian and sub-Hardyesque modes; and that Bennett and Galsworthy did indeed, as Jefferson Hunter puts it, "deliberately limit themselves to proven methods" (23). These matters we can agree to put beyond dispute, because what interests us instead is tackling the modernist insistence, which is then written into literary history, that such traits inevitably signify an anti-modern, reactionary, nostalgic, conservative, or, to use Woolf's word, materialist world view.

24 What we want to question, ultimately, is the assumption that it was the modernists who "did" modernity, while the Edwardians, and others, were doing something else, something less, something un-modern or even anti-modern. If we can do that, I suggest, then we will have gone some way to advancing the cause of a "new short story studies."

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ABSTRACTS

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les « nouvelles études modernistes » ont transformé notre compréhension de la littérature du début du XXe siècle. En dépit de cela, la nouvelle continue d'être envisagée en des termes largement formalistes, à travers des concepts critiques qui, dans certains cas, remontent aux années 1970 et 1980. Les descriptions contextuelles et historiques du genre restent rares, à l'instar des explications qui reflètent les tendances récentes de la théorie critique et culturelle. Cet article envisage un avenir alternatif à la critique de la nouvelle. En s'inspirant du récit de Fredric Jameson, « Romance », au tournant du XXe siècle, il plaide pour un élargissement chronologique et conceptuel de notre compréhension de la nouvelle au cours de cette période, et montre comment une « nouvelle façon d'étudier la nouvelle » pourrait commencer à s'écarter du formalisme.

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