

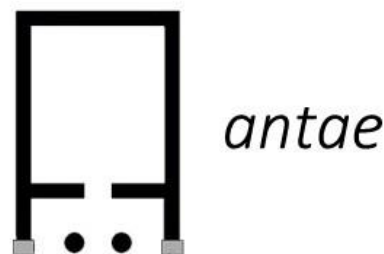
The Unruly Rules of the Game: Writing Game and Writing Practice in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*

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The Unruly Rules of the Game: Writing Game and Writing Practice in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*

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I will begin with Roland Barthes's description of the relationship between writer and reader as a game:

Does writing in pleasure guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game.¹

The play of this game is made possible by the writer's imaginative seeking out of his reader as well as by the reader's openness to being found. If each does his or her part to foster the space of play, of dialectics, and of an '*unpredictability* of bliss', Barthes asserts, then 'there can still be a game'. Though it is clear from Barthes's elaboration of this model in *The Pleasure of the Text* and 'The Death of the Author' that the play and thus the pleasure of the text demands the author's disappearance, and though one can assume that, in actuality, the writer has many readers rather than a single reader, it is crucial for Barthes that reading and writing be imagined as an erotic encounter *à deux*—between two minds and two hearts—so that the risk of rejection or boredom is involved. In summoning the tentative game of courtship, the rules of which evolve as the game goes on, Barthes lays bare the intensity and necessity of relating to another that is involved in writing.

But what if the rules of the game were radically reconfigured, and the field of play relocated and redrawn? What if the reader became an amorphous adversary rather than an elusive playmate? In this essay, I first ask how Barthes's model of writing is troubled by the literary equivalent of spectator sports—literature written for a mass audience. I will then move toward an answer through a reading of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), a novel that presents the traditionally intimate author-reader relationship, strained and displaced by the more anonymous relationship between author and mass readership. As the former declines in relevance and possibility, boredom emerges as its last resistance against mass culture's dominance.

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 4.

In spectator sports, the dynamics of the game are not confined to the field of play, but are rather defined by the audience in attendance. Here, I appeal to Marshall McLuhan's theorisation of the spectator sport:

[I]n the case of football you have an audience, without which there would be no game. What would a football game be without an audience? It would be a practice. [...] [B]ecause there's no public there's no game [...]. In a theatre, if there's no audience at all, you have a rehearsal but you don't have a play.²

In the greater context of Marshall McLuhan's theory—so often condensed in the phrase ‘the medium is the message’—the spectator sport is possible only in the realm of the mass audience. The masses, in turn, are a product of electronic rather than print media, or of the radio, telephone, television, cinema, and—we will add—the internet rather than the newspaper, book, and pamphlet. Whereas the latter forms of media are received by a large but still circumscribed public, the former address an almost limitless mass audience. Electronic media are essentially interactive, promoting more conversation among users than does the isolating technology of print, as well as uniting them under the same activity—be it watching a televised football game or listening to a radio broadcast—across great distances, so that individual spectators in different countries could be said to be members of the same audience. Since the rules and conventions of the spectator sport have long been settled before the first ball is thrown, the play on the field is beside the point. While Barthes's imagining of the game grants each player the power to accept or reject the game's terms as well as the opponent, McLuhan's description of the spectator sport places the ball in the spectators' court, leaving it to them to determine collectively whether or not ‘there can still be a game’.³

Before we proceed, it remains to be determined in what ways the phenomena of electronic media and its appeal to a mass audience can be compared to, or at least prefigured in, print, the medium with which this paper is primarily concerned. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of print technologies which allowed print media to become cheaply available to an unprecedented readership and, in some cases, on a synchronised schedule. The numbers that printed material was able to reach, as well as the relative simultaneity with which it was able to do so, brought readers together under one communal heading and thus expressed the mass communicative potential intrinsic to the later electronic media. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the synchronicity and relative universality of newspaper-reading were particularly crucial to the formation of national publics. Marrying McLuhan with Marx, Anderson emphasises the newspaper's commodity aspect, locating its organising and value-bearing powers in the medium itself rather than in its content or message.⁴ He cites Friedrich Hegel's rather

² ‘Speaking Freely with Marshall McLuhan’, *Speaking Freely*, PBS-TV, (January 4, 1971). You can listen to the full broadcast at Ubuweb: <<http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html>> [accessed 26 August, 2015].

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 33-35.

McLuhanesque observation that ‘newspapers serve modern man as substitute for morning prayers’, and concludes that, though the act of reading the newspaper is a solitary one,

each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?⁵

The newspaper readers’ experience of one another promoted a degree of interactivity and discussion, presaging the interactivity of electronic media, as formulated by McLuhan.

The press’s power to bring more eyes, ears, and voices to the discursive table dovetailed with the revolutions of Western Europe. As Rick Altman explains, with the revolutionary triumph of the middle classes, a relatively small community determined by elite class or family relations no longer controlled discourse over common interests. Instead, the previously marginalised bourgeoisie began to

take over the centre and produce the prose shared by Hegel and his fellow newspaper readers. What was once an intense, reasoned discourse aimed at specific, known individuals would eventually be hollowed out and turned into an excuse for a “secular, historically clocked, imagined community”.⁶

Quoting Anderson, Altman similarly emphasises the medium function over its message. A once controlled, elite discourse is ‘hollowed out’, so that discourse becomes a mere ‘excuse’ for the communal recognition and participation of a mass community. The masses’ self-affirmation, and not content, becomes paramount.

It is important to note, however, that content became more diverse: though the newspaper united its readers under one activity at roughly the same time, it would be inaccurate to suggest that it delivered homogeneous content, or created a homogeneous readership. Included in the new opportunities for self-affirmation and participation in discourse was the chance for untraditional readers to emerge into authorship, and in alarming numbers. Rick Altman discusses the subsequent fragmentation of the public into publics, stating that the ‘[s]cores of separate topics, separate rubrics, separate styles and separate genres [...] spr[ing] up as vehicles for the lateral communication of individual constellated communities’—communities formed by writers from a variety of backgrounds, catering to a variety of interests⁷ But it was primarily the democratisation of discourse, rather than its diversification, that caused anxiety in cultural elites, who foresaw the erosion of their authority and foreheard the muffling of their once-privileged

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 35.

⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), p. 197.

⁷ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 198.

voices. As Charles-Auguste Sainte-Beuve woefully stated in his essay on ‘Industrial Literature’, the field of Literature

has always been infested by gangs, but never has it been invaded, exploited, proclaimed as their own by so large a gang, a gang as disparate and almost organized as the one we see today, and with only this motto written on their flag: ‘Live by writing!’⁸

His evocation of the masses as a monolithic ‘gang’ modifies the essay’s opening statement that, from up close, each literary era ‘unfolds successively in all manner of diversity and difference’.⁹ Rather, Literature’s reigning preoccupation, he says, is self-display and profit: ‘The great mass of literature [...], no longer felt internally, and no longer revealed externally, anything other than its real motives, which is to say an unbridled display of egotism and a pressing need to live’.¹⁰ Sainte-Beuve’s objections reinforce what is generally observed of the nineteenth-century reading public: from the various publics that existed, two fundamental groups can be discerned—those numerous, newly and/or merely literate readers and writers who consumed and produced print entertainment or news; and those more thoroughly educated and critical readers who desired literary art. This basic division implicitly presented each writer with a choice: write for the masses and play to the crowd, or develop a writing practice independent of a mass readership.

I now turn to an author whose 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, represents this choice and its aftermaths. George Gissing was a chemist’s son who, like many other members of the middle class aiming to live by their pens, first wrote commercially to avoid starvation. His struggle to adapt his vocation to what he felt were degrading market demands are most thoroughly recorded in *New Grub Street*, as are the points of view of those authors who, unlike Gissing, seemed to thrive with the popular but heavily padded triple-decker novel format, had no trouble upholding the frivolous character of commercial literature in their own works, and comfortably addressed a reading public that was larger and less educated than reading publics past. By laying out his grievances and their counterpoints, Gissing presents and problematizes the shifting rules of the literary game, as well as this shift’s ramifications for the relationship between authors and their audience. If we follow Pierre Bourdieu’s precept that writers explore their possible fates by subjecting their characters to them, then we can, through a reading of Gissing’s novel, investigate the writer’s own assessment of his imagined audience vis à vis the experiences of his author-characters.¹¹

New Grub Street aptly opens in the country, the traditional staging ground for the novel of literary success or failure (the principal examples being Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* (1843), Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1848-50), Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), and Flaubert’s

⁸ Charles-Auguste Sainte-Beuve, ‘Industrial Literature’, in *Revolutions in Writing: Readings in Nineteenth-Century French Prose*, ed. and trans. by Rosemary Lloyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 24-31, (p. 28).

⁹ Charles-Auguste Sainte-Beuve, ‘Industrial Literature’, p. 24.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Sentimental Education (1869)). Jasper Milvain, ‘A Man of His Day’ and one of the novel's few successful characters, muses over the problem of making a viable career of writing as he takes breakfast with his family at their Wattleborough home. The Man of His Day must necessarily learn how to enter the biggest game possible, with the biggest number of spectators. The first step, Milvain declares, is to embrace precisely what Sainte-Beuve decried in letters: that writing is a business, the writer a businessman. Milvain achieves his point through comparison, evoking the maudlin figure of his novelist friend, Edwin Reardon, who comes to stand as the novel's literary failure:

[Reardon] is the old type of unpractical artist; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them; he can't supply the market [...]. Reardon [...] sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson's Grub Street. But our Grub Street of to-day is quite a different place: it is supplied with telegraphic communication, it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants are men of business, however seedy.¹²

Milvain compares himself to Reardon at the same time as he compares old to new Grub Street—old Grub Street a site of ‘heroic literary penury’ made legend by Samuel Johnson, and new Grub Street a commercial literary hub attuned to world markets (*NGS*, 523). Whereas we infer the image of Reardon hunched over a desk in solitary toil, Milvain aims to attach himself to a nervous system whose innervations are checked only by market demand. And indeed, Milvain later attributes his success as a Grub Street hack to his utilisation of other brains: as he tells Reardon, “‘a man who has to live by miscellaneous writing couldn't get on without a vast variety of acquaintances. One's own brain would soon run dry; a clever fellow knows how to use the brains of other people’” (*NGS*, 168). And once one has something to write about, the rest is simple: “[G]o to work methodically”, Milvain advises his sisters, who wish to break into publishing, “‘so many pages a day. There's no question of the divine afflatus; that belongs to another sphere of life’” (*NGS*, 17). When his sister Maud objects that such methods will churn out material that is “‘worthless’”, Milvain coolly replies, “‘No; you'll probably make it worth a guinea or so’” (*NGS*, 388).

The rules for a successful writing game, as Milvain sees it, are rather plain: get connected to the appropriate channels, mine other minds for content, and apply one's self diligently to the assembly of articles or stories. Thus, one's output will appeal to most of the people, most of the time; one's name will spread, his opportunities will increase, and he will be well on his way to making his fortune. Yet these rules are not so simple for Milvain's acknowledged opposite, whose affinity for Classical languages and texts, insistence on literature as a handcraft, and yearning for a second wind from the ‘divine afflatus’ all derive from obsolete conditions of literary production. Reardon is a study of doing everything wrong: though his wife Amy chides him for not “‘look[ing] at things in a more practical way’”, Reardon blames his inability to write

¹² George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. by John Goode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 8-9. Henceforth cited in text as (*NGS*, page number).

profitably on his “unpardonable sin” of making a trade of an art (*NGS*, 55); though he sits down to work on a daily schedule, the sun often sets on his still-blank pages—upon our first impression of Reardon, for example, the narrator reveals that after three hours' work he has only managed to write the words, ‘Chapter III’ (*NGS*, 47). And though the early novels that made Reardon's reputation are described as ‘almost purely psychological’, with no concern for ‘story’ or ‘active life’ but boasting ‘strong characterisation’ and ‘intellectual fervour’, the novels he must write to earn a living require character types, contrived plots, sensational titles, and ‘laborious padding’—or superfluous description and dialogue deployed to fulfill the three-volume format then demanded by the circulating libraries (*NGS*, 62, 131). Failure to write in the requisite format meant that one's book would go unordered by the libraries, unread by their subscribers, and so unpublished in the first place; failure to write according to convention meant dismissive reviews and reduced sales. Gissing comments on one such review of a naturalist novel based on a grocer's daily life, written by Reardon's friend Biffen:

‘The first duty of a novelist is to tell a story’: the perpetual repetition of this phrase is a warning to all men who propose drawing from the life. Biffen only offered a slice of biography, and it was found to lack flavor. (*NGS*, 486)

Types, plots, and padding are the essential components of a popular novel, and essentially what it pains Reardon to write—regardless of his commitment to yielding ‘so many pages a day’. Another of *New Grub Street's* writers, Marian Yule, suffers more specifically from the mechanicity inherent in writing as a trade. Several of the novel's most poignant scenes have to do with neither love nor poverty, but revolve around her daily grind in the British Museum's Reading-Room, or, as she calls it, the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Books’. Marian spends her days researching her father's planned essay topics, and comes to regard herself as his ‘machine for reading and writing’ rather than a woman with feelings, intellect, and aspirations of her own (*NGS*, 106). She fantasises about the existence of a ‘literary machine’ capable of assembling articles from scraps of other writing in a scene that comments, in her wish to be automated out of a job, on the numbing, repetitious nature of Grub Street work (*NGS*, 107). Not fully machine, Marian contemplates the consequences of her output:

When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. [...] To write—was not that the joy and the privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? [A]ll these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print—how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit! (*NGS*, 106-107)

Added to Marian's horror of being a literary machine is her awareness of being a cog in still another, that of the British Museum. Her horror takes on a spiritual tone as well: the fog creeping into the library obscures her fellow library-goers, so that a man walking in the upper gallery appears ‘a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along endless

shelves'; readers at 'radiating lines of desks' become 'hapless flies caught in a huge web'; and the dust from the stacks augments the gloom and impenetrability of the library air (*NGS*, 107). Hell's eternity of labour conveys Marian's exhaustion; more implicitly, her imaging of Hell recalls both Milvain's statement that the 'divine afflatus' has nothing to do now with writing and Reardon's sense that making a trade of art is an 'unpardonable sin'. Consciously or not, Marian registers the spiritual and personal invalidation of anonymous and badly remunerated toil undertaken for everyone and no one in particular: this is a hell of anonymity as much as it is one of monotonous drudgery. Here Milvain's expansive talk of telegraphy and networking are contradicted, since the only masses that Marian can access are those confined within the library walls, united in their separation from the diversions with which they supply the world.

And indeed, Gissing's successful Grub Streeters, Jasper Milvain and Mr Whelpdale, are the only ones who picture their readership clearly. Reardon, on the other hand, imagines his readers only in the context of his failure to communicate himself, both in the sense that he is no longer capable of a masterpiece, but also in the sense that the printed page obscures the pain behind its creation. "What hellish torment it was to write that page!" Reardon cries upon leafing through his latest published novel, "And to think that people will skim over it without a suspicion of what it cost the writer!—What execrable style!" (*NGS*, 201). Reardon mourns his lack of connection to his reader, a connection made impossible by circumstances that require he write beneath his intellect and talent. Amy attempts to boost his confidence, asserting that "Yours is the kind of face that people come to know in portraits" and, referring to his latest novel's production values, "It doesn't look like a book that fails" (*NGS*, 198, 200). But from her comments, we understand Amy's idea of connection to be purely visual, based on mutable surface sheen, whereas Reardon's connections emanate from an immutable intellectual core. Reardon tells his wife he does not balk at producing sensational fiction for the sake of his reputation, but rather he shrinks from 'conscious insincerity of workmanship'; he does not hate his work because he resents the public whose taste demands it, but because appealing to public taste entails dishonest self-presentation (*NGS*, 53). Better, he concludes, to abandon authorship for a steadily paying, though thoroughly boring and socially degrading, post as a hospital clerk. As a result, his wife—set on the society life she had formerly associated with literary men—leaves him, and his health deteriorates. While he predicts that Milvain will go on to "live in a mansion, and dictate literary opinions to the universe", Reardon dies impoverished and relatively alone (*NGS*, 166).

The world Gissing represents in his *New Grub Street* is an impersonal one, offering to its inhabitants either communal stupefaction or severe isolation. Neither offering makes a home of modernity, nor restores the individual to the human community, perceived by Gissing as irreversibly lost to the ravages of capital and mass culture. Though they are humble, the alternatives Gissing proposes are aptly personal if strangely isolating: if the problem is formulated as the atomising nature of modern society, then how is boredom—as demonstrated in Reardon's withdrawal from the literary world—a solution? To answer this question, I turn finally

to ‘Boredom’, a brief but concise essay by the early-twentieth-century critic of the Frankfurt School, Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer begins his essay by framing the problem of contemporary culture as one of no longer being able to be bored:

People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there.¹³

Kracauer diagnoses modern sickness as the disappearance—in the various “greynesses” of the work schedule and its supposed opposite, the relentless distractions of mass culture—of the self. Similarly, Gissing’s depiction of the urban scene—in which consumer attention is routed through an endless cycle of commercial ephemera, in which the call to conform is implicit in every mass-cultural offering, and in which the inability or refusal to participate entails loss of livelihood and social viability—reveals the individual to be imperiled. A state in which desire is suspended, as Adam Phillips elaborates in his essay ‘On Being Bored’, boredom is a holding pattern in which the exhausted or overextended subject momentarily suspends engagement with the world at hand, finding in himself a means to re-engagement or the justification for ultimate retreat.¹⁴ Boredom is the individual’s necessarily empty seat of potential, merely the promise of its own occupation, but that is violently overturned by mass culture’s abhorrence of a vacuum. Rather than being left to ourselves, Kracauer continues, we are given endless distraction, so that ‘already one is banished from one’s own emptiness into the alien *advertisement*’.¹⁵ Rather than dissolve into the world’s work-weariness or be claimed by this distraction, Kracauer advocates that one ‘stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one’s boredom on the sofa’.¹⁶ It is only in this state of willful seclusion that one grapples with his self, which is to say, his boredom, his sense of not knowing what one should be doing, his ‘inner restlessness without a goal’.¹⁷ By Phillips’s Winnicottian formulation, this method is the means by which a goal can be formed or seemingly discovered. And this is, perhaps, an optimistic formulation, according to both Kracauer’s and Gissing’s stands on the subject. For Kracauer, if one has the patience for what he calls ‘radical boredom’, colorful and alternative worlds will come gradually into view: the soul will swell with a great passion, boredom will come to an end, and—Kracauer does not complete his vision. Instead, he states that the issue of boredom is perhaps no greater than an essay on boredom: ‘the great passion fizzles out on the horizon. And in the boredom that refuses to abate, one hatches bagatelles that are as boring as this one’.¹⁸ But an essay on boredom is still

¹³ Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Boredom’, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 331-334, (p. 331).

¹⁴ Adam Phillips, ‘On Being Bored’, in *On Kissing, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 68-78.

¹⁵ Kracauer, ‘Boredom’, p. 332.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 334.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

something—it is, if nothing else, a taking stock of the world as one experiences it. It is the occupation of a point of view that stands in an observational attitude with regard to society.

Reardon's Bartleby-esque withdrawal outlines one possible response to the prospect of writing profitably for the masses, one that anticipates the stance of twentieth-century cultural critics and avant-gardists. Certainly, Gissing does not ask us to celebrate Reardon's removal from reputation, intellectual work, family, and society—in fact, his narrator allows that we may be exasperated by his total lack of pluck, stating,

The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon [...]. You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on; why don't they bestir themselves, push and bustle, welcome kicks so long as halfpence follow, make place in the world's eye—in short, take a leaf from the book of Mr. Jasper Milvain? (NGS, 425)

But Gissing goes on to urge us to value Reardon's allegiance to the creative act and the uncompromised self. 'From the familiar point of view', he writes, 'these men were worthless; view them in possible relation to a humane order of society, and they are admirable citizens' (NGS, 425). If the order of society is inhumane, then it is right to refuse it. Whereas Barthes, thinking of the 'erotic' circumstances in which writing is a craft, conceives of boredom as the limit-case of the attention game that holds between reader and writer, Gissing posits boredom as the consequence of and alternative to the game gone awry, out of balance.

As I have attempted to show, from the writer's perspective, the inhumanity of late-Victorian society lay in its commodification of art, in the boggling writer-to-reader ratio required to earn a livelihood, and in the frivolousness and caprice belonging to and encouraged in the masses addressed. The writer who adapts is necessarily a contortionist, capable of disassembling and reassembling his goals, creeds, and styles to whatever plays well to audience demand. He accepts the very fragmentation his work fosters in culture by indulging his readers' taste for the trivial, the diverting, and the short-lived. As Milvain's fellow Grub Streeter Mr Whelpdale says, rather than substance, he provides his readers with "bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery"; otherwise, they will lose interest (NGS, 460). But lack of interest, Gissing argues through Reardon, is the appropriate attitude toward an impoverished environment, an attitude all the more crucial going forward as electronic media begins to compete with print for mass audiences. Boredom, as Kracauer asserts, is what the world 'ultimately deserves'¹⁹; if one does not allow one's self to be fragmented and 'chased away' by culture's relentless glitter, '[t]hen boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one's own existence'.²⁰ We can best understand both Reardon's desire for an artistically conscious writing *practice* over an audience- and market-centered writing game, as well as his eventual abandonment of literature, in this context.

¹⁹ Kracauer, p. 332.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 334.

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