Unlike the God of Human Error

Percy Shelley’s Departure from Universal Gender

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Percy Shelley is known to modern anarchists, if he is known at all, by a few lines from "The Mask of Anarchy",[1] a political poem he penned after the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, when cavalry attacked a large crowd demanding the reform of the Parliamentary system. This poem, surging with the righteous anger of a peace-loving poet, contains a refrain sung (as if) by the Earth to her children:

> Rise like Lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number—
> Shake your chains to Earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you—
> Ye are many—they are few.[2]
> (368–72)

These lines notwithstanding, Shelley tended to avoid, especially in his longer poems, explicitly engaging with politics. It is not that he was uninterested in ideas of a radical, or even anarchist, sort. When Shelley was eighteen years old, and a promising young scholar at Oxford, he published a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism" and sent it to the heads of each of the colleges of Oxford. For this rebellion he was promptly expelled from the institution, whose charter at that time still restricted enrollment to Christians. Upon his expulsion, he sought out other radicals and wrote to William Godwin, whose *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* Shelly had read. The central thesis of Godwin's lengthy book was the necessity of abolishing government, and it can be considered the first articulation of anarchism (without the word) in the Western canon.

Shelley also became acquainted with one of Godwin's daughters, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, with whom he would develop a romance, and who would later go on to pen the most well-known text of this unusual family of writers, *Frankenstein*,[3] as well as with the writing of the late Mary Wollstonecraft, who published one of the first Western defenses of feminism, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Percy and the young Mary read Wollstonecraft's words to each other as they traveled.

Percy's radical ideas are also conveyed in his poetry, as we shall see, as a critique of hierarchy, government, religion, and commerce. Yet for the most part, Shelley's project differed from that of Godwin or Wollstonecraft. His major written contribution was to develop a thoroughly radical metaphysics. The subtitle of his first major work, *Queen Mab*, for example, is "A Philosophical Poem." Its themes include death and sleep, imagination and spirit. The metaphysical bent to his poetry should not surprise us in light of atheism being the subject of his great act of rebellion at Oxford, as well as the relative power of Christianity in his day.

Thanks to Shelley's relation to Godwin, Wollstonecraft and other radicals, as well as his lucid expression of anarchist principles, we believe it is not out of bounds to read his philosophical

[1] Shelley's usage of 'Anarchy' in the title and the body of the poem does not refer his own ideal but to the Chaos which spreads death across the land. That the Anarchy of the poem is essentially the opposite of the ideal shared by Shelley and those who have later called themselves anarchists is demonstrated by how the soldiers, lawyers, and priests greet him: "Thou art King, and God, and Lord; / Anarchy, to Thee we bow, / Be thy name made holy now!"

[2] The first three words of this refrain have recently been adopted as the name of an anarchist publishing project in the northwest region of the United States as well as the title of a documentary film about the Occupy Movement.

[3] After she took the surname Shelley from Percy himself. Percy being the subject of this essay, we will use their shared surname to refer solely to him.

poetry as one of the very few thorough articulations of an anarchist metaphysics. We might take the gap between Shelley's metaphysics and Godwin and Wollstonecraft's politics as an invitation to consider this dichotomy. What constitutes anarchist thought in the political sphere is a matter of contention, but outside of the political sphere—in metaphysics for instance—one might wonder whether or not anarchist thought can be spoken of at all.[4] While it is outside the scope of this essay to address this question directly, our engagement with Shelley will presuppose an interest in anarchy as it departs from the political and, indeed, from the sphere of human society entirely, pursuing far stranger, even extraterrestrial, orientations.

Not Human Sense, Not Human Mind

Queen Mab is Shelley's first major work and also his most aspiring, written mere months after "Necessity of Atheism." It mainly consists of a speech delivered by Mab, the Fairy Queen, to a human spirit which Mab has whisked away from the sleeping body of Ianthe and brought to look upon the universe from atop her celestial palace. Shelley's cosmology as told by Mab is an ambitious attempt to leave unsettled no question of universal principle, natural law, human behavior, time, or nearly any philosophical mystery. The Fairy Queen declares that she holds all the secrets of the human world, and before she begins her great discourse, promises Ianthe's spirit that "the past shall rise; / Thou shalt behold the present; I will teach / The secrets of the future." (II, 65–67)

In *Mab,* Shelley's task is to negate God's existence or, as his epigraph from Voltaire puts it, "ecrasez l'infame!"—crush the demon! Shelley makes his attack by expounding a radical determinism. As in the title of his pamphlet on atheism, the name he uses to signify both the non-existence of God and the underlying principle of the universe is *Necessity.* Necessity here refers to the inevitable chain of causation that denies religion and God. From Shelley's own note on *Mab*:

> He who asserts the doctrine of Necessity, means that,… he beholds only an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects… The doctrine of Necessity tends to introduce a great change into the established notions of morality, and utterly to destroy religion… There is neither good nor evil in the universe, otherwise than as the events to which we apply those epithets have in relation to our own peculiar mode of being.

Defying the Christian doctrine of free will, Shelley claims that freedom is nothing but a lack of knowledge of what must happen by Necessity. Yet *Mab* is not what one might expect from a philosophical mind that views every event in history and every human emotion or thought as "a link / In the great chain of Nature" (II, 107–8). It is not what one might call purely scientific or rationalist. It is a poem starring a fairy and a disembodied spirit traveling through space

[4] Mary Shelley, who was closely acquainted with these ideas as they existed in the political sphere of her parents and the metaphysical sphere of her lover, can be read as interweaving, in *Frankenstein*, anarchic thought between these spheres. The interweaving of metaphysics with the issues of present society is indeed a fitting definition of science fiction, the genre that Mary Shelley is credited with pioneering in *Frankenstein.* Mary Shelley is not the subject of this essay, but parties intrigued by the topic may be interested in reading her in this light.

on a chariot pulled by celestial horses. Even more, *Mab* is an ode to an atheism informed by imagination and fancy.

Shelley's appreciation of the imagination goes beyond mere positive association with poetry. In *Mab*, human fancy is the explicit vehicle for reaching the perspective through which the poem's philosophical content is delivered. This is illustrated well by the poem's opening lines, a musing on the relation of sleep and death while the narrator looks on the sleeping form of Ianthe. This part suggests that the entire narrative takes place neither in reality nor in Ianthe's sleeping mind but rather in the imagination of the narrator as he watches her sleep. The imaginative nature of the space journey is illuminated even more by the interlude once Mab and Ianthe reach the palace:

> If solitude hath ever led thy steps
> To the wild ocean's echoing shore,
> And thou hast lingered there,
> Until the sun's broad orb
> Seemed resting on the burnished wave,
> Thou must have marked the lines
> Of purple gold, that motionless
> Hung o'er the sinking sphere:
> (…)
> Then has thy fancy soared above the earth,
> And furled its wearied wing
> Within the Fairy's fane.[5]
> (II, 1–21)

How can Shelley's atheist position be reached by watching the sunset? The sunset is one of the rare instances when the human imagination is able to watch (in real time, one might say) the earth and sun in motion through the immensity of space and catch a hint of the tremendous scale of the universe, in which humans are tiny and adrift. We should think of this as the perspective from which Mab gives her speech. This also explains how the scientific method is useful to Shelley's project in spite of his poetic and fanciful approach: much like the view of a setting sun, the view through a telescope helps one imagine the scale of the universe and grasp the folly of religious belief. Shelley is explicit about the connection between scale and atheism in his note to the description of Mab and Ianthe's travel through space to the fairy palace:

> The plurality of worlds,—the indefinite immensity of the universe is a most awful subject of contemplation. He who rightly feels its mystery and grandeur, is in no danger of seduction from the falshoods of religious systems, or of deifying the principle of the universe.

By the falsehood of religion Shelley means that humans, out of ignorance and vanity, have created God in their own image to encapsulate everything they do not understand. The precondition for the error of religion is *awe:* a theme Shelley will dwell on throughout his poetry. There are various ways people deal with an experience of awe: fear, forgetfulness, nostalgia, reverence.

[5] Temple.

For Shelley, religion is born when the nameless unknown that gives rise to awe is abstracted and given a name. Then all the real or desired human qualities are projected onto the religious entity, and people believe they themselves can be eternal like their gods. They build monuments and temples as testaments to the supposed universality of their religions. But Mab will show how foolish this is. Once Ianthe and Mab reach the battlements of the palace and look out over the vastness of space, capable of seeing everything at universal scale from the perspective of soaring fancy, they can see the futility of human civilization and its attempts at immortality. As they look on the ruins of an ancient civilization, Mab asks:

> What is immortal there?
> Nothing—it stands to tell
> A melancholy tale, to give
> An awful warning: soon
> Oblivion will steal silently
> The remnant of its fame.
> Monarchs and conquerors there
> Proud o'er prostrate millions trod—
> The earthquakes of the human race;
> Like them, forgotten when the ruin
> That marks their shock is past.
> (II, 115–25)

The greatest monuments to human pride[6(end)] are insignificant and transitory next to the vast harmonic wilderness of space, the only "fitting temple" to the Spirit of Nature (I, 264–8). But it is not just because of their vanity and folly that Shelly attacks religion and state. The monuments to human pride, destined only to fall into ruin, are built at the cost of human suffering:

> Oh! many a widow, many an orphan cursed
> The building of that fane; and many a father,
> Worn out with toil and slavery, implored
> The poor man's God to sweep it from the earth,
> And spare his children the detested task
> Of piling stone on stone, and poisoning
> The choicest days of life,
> To soothe a dotard's vanity.
> (II, 141–8)

Not even the rulers are free from this suffering. Shelley describes at length the despair of the King, bound by his own golden chains and incapable of experiencing the very peace for which he built his tremendous palaces and temples, but which does not care for human monuments and does not visit him because his heart is without virtue.

Mab declares that human hierarchy has no parallel in nature, whose spirit is spread equally through every being, and promises that all human authority "Will lose its power to dazzle; its authority / Will silently pass by" (III, 133–4). Shelley's hope, much like Godwin's, is that increased human knowledge must cause them to abandon government and religion, while their capacity for virtuous action will also grow. To this end, several of Queen Mab's cantos discuss themes of

an anarchist nature, seeking to illuminate the evils of hierarchy as it manifests in government, religion, war, and commerce.

In another canto, Shelley is more explicit about his assertion that religion develops through people's urge to give names to what they do not know or understand. Using the metaphor of the development of a human from childhood to old age, he walks through the stages of religious belief. To the child, all the aspects of nature are gods: the stars, trees, clouds, mountain, sun, and moon. The adolescent turns to deify spirits, ghosts and other forces. Then man, his pride mocked by the unknown wonders around him, takes all of these and all of their causes, and makes them converge upon a single abstract point, which he calls God:

> The self-sufficing, the omnipotent,
> The merciful, and the avenging God!
> Who, prototype of human misrule, sits
> High in heaven's realm, upon a golden throne,
> Even like an earthly king; and whose dread work,
> Hell, gapes for ever for the unhappy slaves
> Of fate, whom he created, in his sport,
> To triumph in their torments when they fell!
> (IV, 103–10)

Finally, in his last years, man's decaying religion requires more gods (we can presume Shelley is thinking of Christianity's trinity). This sense that religion has reached a stage of decay is one of the reasons Shelley feels hope and the certainty that those who champion truth will overcome the terrible falsehood that dominates human thought.

Even though Shelley praises the Spirit of Nature, he is clear to point out that this entity has absolutely no concern for human flattery:

> Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power,
> Necessity! thou mother of the world!
> Unlike the God of human error, thou
> Requirest no prayers or praises; the caprice
> Of man's weak will belongs no more to thee
> Than do the changeful passions of his breast
> To thy unvarying harmony…
> (VI, 197–203)

Also worth noting in this passage are Shelley's four different names for the same underlying principle of the universe, an indication that he finds no fitting name for it, and chooses his words for their allusive power. The names "Spirit of Nature" and "Power" (capitalized and with differing adjectives) will reappear in his later works. Necessity, however, falls out of its favored place[6], possibly because it indicates a strict order to nature that Shelley will begin to question. Finally, "mother of the world," the most anthropomorphic of the group. This last term will reappear,

[6] Shelley does invoke the term again in *Laon and Cynthia or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century* (which he later retitled *The Revolt of Islam*). This poem describes the rise and fall of a fleeting uprising, and studies the errors that lead to the reimposition of order.

though with an added layer of uncertainty, in *Alastor*, and then is discarded. Shelley's abandonment of this term coincides with his assertion that the principle of the universe is utterly inhuman and indifferent to humanity, as in this passage also from *Mab*:

> …all that the wide world contains
> Are but thy passive instruments, and thou
> Regardst them all with an impartial eye,
> Whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel,
> Because thou hast not human sense,
> Because thou art not human mind.
> (VI, 214–19)

It is this appreciation of the infinite apathy of the universe that makes Shelley's metaphysics interesting to us. There is no doubt his appreciation goes alongside a tendency to romanticize this same principle, especially in *Mab*. When he refers to it as "mother of the world," he has gone far enough down this path that many will be able to recognize a radicalism they can relate to—after all, there had been a tremendous campaign of murder aimed in large part at annihilating the feminine divine in Europe for centuries leading up to this poem, and this fact alone could have persuaded Shelley into believing, as he did, that *Mab* was too radical for his own safety.[7] But to our minds this is a reactive form of engagement that, while always having been part of radicalism, fails to interest us. If Shelley had only declared the principle of the universe to be a feminine, we would not bother to engage with him here. As we will see, however, Shelley's metaphysics is much more interesting. It is an atheism full of fancy and wonder, reticent to impose human limits on the underlying principle of the universe, that denies every category and name imposed on the great unknown.

Lift Not the Painted Veil

As much as Shelley sings of the mystery and unknowability of the universal principle in *Queen Mab,* in his zeal to reveal the falsehood of religion and hierarchy he does pass into the same sort of error (albeit more cautiously, and self-consciously) that he accuses religion of. For evidence of this, one could simply point to the fact that so much of *Queen Mab* is a long speech that claims to make known the truths of the universe. These truths, moreover, are supposed to come from a fairy entity whose knowledge is far beyond human thought and whose perspective is much closer to the Spirit of Nature itself. But one might note, more specifically, Shelley's unshaken faith in Necessity, his certainty that every motion and event throughout space and time are untouched by chance or will, that they are nothing other than the fulfillment of natural law. We shall see that Shelley's certainty about this will not long remain unshaken.

One way to read Shelley's philosophical poetry after *Mab* is that he draws the veil of mystery over the unseen power to which he had put name, face, and human emotion. An aspect of this retraction is his strange blurring and erasure of the gendered marks he had at first placed upon the Spirit of Nature. This obscuration can be read as merely incidental, since it is only one of the

[7] Shelley had the text printed in his name and then distributed about seventy copies to persons he felt relatively unthreatened by, but only after cutting out his name and address from the text, usually removing his opening dedica-

anthropomorphisms Shelley projected on this inhuman principle and later saw fit to withdraw. And, indeed, in a different world and a different political context, we might pay no special attention to the issue of gender in Shelley's work. Then, however, as now, the gendering of the divine was not merely a side-issue but was (and is) instead a battleground for various social and political struggles.[8] Just as we cannot pretend Shelley, fully involved in the radicalism of his day, was ignorant of the political significance of gender especially as it might relate to the divine, neither can we dismiss the importance of this subject to many of our contemporaries. For this reason, we are excited to find in Shelley someone touched by the desire to recast images of divinity in inverted forms radical enough to warrant death, but who also felt that this fell into the same error as what it opposed.

In *Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude*, Shelley's next major work after *Mab*, the veil he had pushed aside now reappears to shroud the truth with mystery. While before, an inviting Fairy Queen took the stage and spoke openly all the secrets of the universe, now the poem's protagonist, a poet who wanders the world in search of ultimate truths, is driven to despair because he sees those secrets flee from him.

Where Ianthe had dreamed a Fairy Queen who flung open the door to knowledge, now the poet dreams of a veiled figure, and though she speaks to him of "knowledge and truth and virtue," Shelley does not recount her speech. We do not learn what she said, only that when the poet catches a glimpse of her face and limbs behind the veil he falls madly in love with her, only to see the vision disappear as he wakes.

Desperate for her return and unable to find her in sleep, the poet decides that death will bring him what sleep cannot.[10(end)] Prepared to die, he sails alone into the sea during a storm.[9] It is in the midst of this storm that we find an intriguing indication of Shelley's changing perspective on causation and certainty. While in *Mab* every motion of every particle in the universe was determined by nature's law, and chance was just a word for human ignorance, the climactic moment of *Alastor* is described with a tone of uncertainty and chaos. The poet has been dragged about the sea in his boat and now hangs on the edge of a whirlpool. The outcome and even the question of what will happen are not framed as we would expect from a strict determinist:

> …the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink
> Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
> Of that resistless gulph embosom it?
> Now shall it fall?—A wandering stream of wind,
> Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,
> And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks
> Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,
> Beneath a woven grove it sails…
> (394–401)

tion of the poem to his then-wife Harriet as well.

[8] We will only make passing reference to two phenomena: first, the rise of monotheism, synonymous with the exclusive masculinity of God, and with the mass devastation of those accused of worshipping a Goddess or goddesses; and second, the counter-movement of recent decades focusing largely on the revival of the concept of divine femininity.

[9] Oddly enough, Shelley would himself die, several years later, in a storm at sea.

In Shelley's universe, which was perfect harmony and necessity in *Mab*, there is now a little room for chance and chaos. What's more, Shelley has stepped back from his own claims at knowledge. In the opening lines to *Alastor*, he again refers to the world's source in the feminine, but this time he says "Mother of this *unfathomable* world" (18, emphasis added). Shelley's tendency to speak of the unknowable, the unfathomable, and the uncertain will only multiply from here.

Alastor can even be read as a warning that the zeal to know the secrets of the universe (as exemplified by the poet) will lead to social isolation and escapism from the world. The remainder of the poem consists of the poet's long solitary journey to his death upon a mountaintop. At the end, Alastor sings the tragedy of the one who seeks to uncover the mysteries of the unfathomable and, carried by this impossible task, is lost to the world.[12(end)]

The closing lines of *Alastor*:

> It is a woe too "deep for tears," when all
> Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
> Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
> Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
> The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
> But pale despair and cold tranquility,
> Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
> Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.
> (713–20)

The poem is not moralistic enough to be a warning, however. What it conveys instead is the kind of awful beauty that characterizes the great tragedies of the Greeks (attuned, like Shelley, to the power of their Fates). This very word, awful, which Shelley uses often, may convey Shelley's strange attitude toward the universe. In the early 19th century when Shelley was writing, the meaning of 'awful' was in a transition from its older sense of evoking wonder and awe to its modern sense of very bad or horrifying. Perhaps at the cusp of these two senses we can intuit a meaning of the term that verges on the odd combination of awe, fear, and terror entailed by Shelley's worldview.

There is tragedy in *Alastor's* parting lines above, as well as in the description of the lonely peak and solitary pine that frame the place of the poet's death. For example, the description of the pine on which the poet places his hand before he lays down to die conveys the quality that accrues to those whose passions lead them to seek the peaks and who endure harsh conditions and solitude. There is an undeniable loveliness and tranquility to the setting and experience of the poet's death, and a tragic inevitability to the departure of the brightest flames from a world too dim for them. What Shelley does seem to warn against in *Alastor* is not the search for truth, even if it leads to solitude and death, but instead the belief that the universe can be fully fathomed and its mystery captured in an enduring image.

Darkness to a Dying Flame

After *Alastor*, Shelley's characterization of the universe and its underlying principle tends still further toward uncertainty and unknowability. The *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* is an ode to an "unseen Power," but more often than not it is addressed to that power's "awful shadow," a shadow

which “Floats though unseen amongst us” (1–2). One gets the sense now that there are layers of mystery and shadow between ourselves and truth, as not only is its shadow with us, but even that shadow goes unseen. But the unseen power’s mystery, Shelley declares, makes it all the more dear to us.

Though the Spirit of Beauty visits the world, its presence is fleeting and it leaves “This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate.” In an attempt to overcome their worldly sorrow, people create “the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,” trying to lend clarity to a power they are ignorant of. But these names, Shelley claims, are unable “to sever, / From all we hear and all we see, / Doubt, chance and mutability” (29–31).

Here, not only does Shelley seem to have abandoned his prior belief in the absolute certainty of the universe, he accuses religion of attempting to eliminate change and uncertainty from the world. Indeed, mutability is now one of the ways he names the underlying principle of the universe, as in the poem entitled *Mutability* which he wrote just before the *Hymn.* This principle goes by many names in the *Hymn*—“unseen Power” (1), “Spirit of beauty” (13), “awful loveliness” (71), “spirit fair” (83) (Shelley uses each of these only once)—and even more metaphors, each evoking mystery and the unknown. One of these metaphors deserves particular mention:

> Thou—that to human thought art nourishment
> Like darkness to a dying flame!
> (44–45)

Here human thought is not created or sustained by an entity in any way familiar or alike to it. Human thought is instead a burning, dying force surrounded by the darkness of everything it finds mysterious and unknown. If it exists, it is by the stark contrast of this vast, encompassing alienness. If it endures, it is because it is filled with wonder and desire by the mystery that surrounds it. Human thought burns, dying, against the darkness of what it does not know.

Shelley will again speak of the mysterious power as the source of human thought in *Mont Blanc,* this time through the metaphor of the streams of water that descend from the mountain much as human thought descends from “secret springs” (4). *Mont Blanc,* in line with the “darkness to a dying flame” in the *Hymn,* is an ode to silence. Shelley concludes the brief ode with these lines:

> … The secret strength of things
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind’s imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy?
> (139–44)

As Shelley’s appreciation of mystery, darkness and silence grow, his metaphors and names for the principle of the universe grow more mysterious, dark and inhuman. Abandoning the name of “mother,” he evokes the power through the darkness in the *Hymn* and the silent, solitary mountain in *Mont Blanc.* The power still gives rise to the universe, not in any birth-like generation, and it nourishes human thought, but without the human emotion and bond that the name of mother

would suggest. Its absence and its mystery are what feed the dying flame of human thought, burning against the darkness.

End notes

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6. Mab's speech on human pride is quite illustrative of Shelley's animist thought:

> How strange is human pride!
> I tell thee that those living things,
> To whom the fragile blade of grass,
> That springeth in the morn
> And perisheth ere noon,
> Is an unbounded world;
> I tell thee that those viewless beings,
> Whose mansion is the smallest particle
> Of the impassive atmosphere,
> Think, feel and live like man;
> That their affections and antipathies,
> Like his, produce the laws
> Ruling their mortal state
> (II, 225–237)

10. This theme echoes the introductory ode from *Queen Mab*:

> How wonderful is Death,
> Death and his brother Sleep!
> One, pale as yonder waning moon
> With lips of lurid blue;
> The other, rosy as the morn
> When throned on ocean's wave
> It blushes o'er the world:
> Yet both so passing wonderful!

12. The tragedy of the brightest ones being lost to the world recurs in Shelley's writing, no doubt because he identifies with these tragic figures who seek truth and knowledge beyond all else. In a later (untitled) sonnet he condenses much of the spirit of *Alastor* into a few lines:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there
And it but mimic all we would believe
With colours idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear
And Hope, twin Destinies, who ever weave
Their shadows o'er the chasm, sightless and drear,
I knew one who had lifted it ... he sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love
But found them not, alas; nor was there aught
The world contains, the which he could approve.
Through the unheeding many he did move,
A splendour among shadows—a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene—a Spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher, found it not.—

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