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“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”. Repetition as a Project in Kierkegaard and Dickinson¹

The article presents a comparative analysis of Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* and the Dickinson poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”, in relation to their poetic and philosophical projects. Through the figure and presence of the ‘nobody,’ it analyzes the manifold patterns of relations between the self and the Thou, the reader and the creator, the writer/poet and the process, as well as between the various existences of the ‘I.’ Thanks to this, both works turn out to be dynamic explorations of identity, which the key question is who am ‘I’ in relation to myself. The article strongly emphasizes the performative aspect of Kierkegaard’s and Dickinson’s works, making it possible to read them as existential exercises in which being a ‘nobody’ is not negative, but is a constant opening to a new, uncertain and interesting existential possibility.

Keywords: identity, existential exercise, existential project, possibility, relationships

1. Between Copenhagen and Amherst. Introduction

The comparison of two exceptional representatives of 19th-century intellectual life, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), is as surprising as it appears natural.² When Dickinson was born in Amherst, Kierkegaard had just

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² Paul Crumbley describes diverse Dickinson scholarship analyzing her “dialogic voice”: “The reception that Dickinson uses multiple speakers, each one of which is capable of possessing more than one voice, helps explain why the process of establishing her position in literary history has been so contentious” (Crumbley 1998: 99). But the Dickinson poem also refers to silence as powerful as it is mysterious. Roger Lundin, commenting the poems “I know that He exists./ Somewhere – in silence –” claims that Dickinson “refuses to sentimentalize silence by putting words into the mouths of the mute realities she questioned” (Lundin 2004: 23), like God and bees, who are considered to be equally important.

begun his theological studies at the University of Copenhagen. At the time of Kierkegaard's premature death, 25-year-old Dickinson was just entering a creative poetic life, having recently left Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Raised as Protestants, both were interested in the human condition in the face of the judgments of God. They wanted to reconcile the principles of faith as much as with the nurturing of the independence of their psychical condition.³ I anchor this comparison in a close reading of two texts that describe a dialogic identity that, through repetition, deepens its knowledge of itself, explores and names its relationship with others, with the world and with God: Kierkegaard's *Repetition* and Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?". Both of these texts are polyphonic projects and an existential exercise. Both Kierkegaard and Dickinson variously refer to the presence of the "nobody" as a way of performing the readiness to think about oneself anew.

2. "Nameless friend", You and I. Nobody as an Identity

Published in 1843 *Repetition. A Venture in Experimental Psychology*, along with one of the most substantial of Kierkegaard's work *Fear and Trembling* (orig. *Frygt og Bæven*),⁴ might be perceived as unrelated (or even unfamiliar) to Dickinson's poetic idiom. Constantin Constantius, one of the pseudonyms of the Danish philosopher and the *Repetition*, having recalled the Greek philosophical disputes on motion,⁵ poses the problem of repetition: "whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated" (Kierkegaard 1983: 131). Composed with philosophical reflexion as well as psychological observations on human relationships (and brief passages about theatre), *Repetition's* structure comes complete with a plot, not less stimulating than the ones from realistic novels. As Joakim Garff accurately states:

[...] *Repetition* has a plot. Indeed, it has more than that: The plot of *Repetition* in fact is about plot, or about things that happen, either entirely accidentally, because things just happen, or because someone else, God, wants it that way. (Garff 2005: 232)

³ Comparing those examples to the verses of her contemporary, Walt Whitman with his *Song of Myself*: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Whitman 2004: 63) or *One's-Self I Sing*: "One's-Self I Sing, a simple separate person" (Whitman 2004: 37) Agnieszka Salska defines Dickinson's separate poetic idiom. Salska discusses Whitman's and Dickinson's usages "the self as persona", as both poets were absorbed by the problem of "self-consciousness" (Salska 1985: 36).

⁴ Joakim Garff claims that "*Repetition* is [...] a noisy laboratory in which each individual concept is made the object of more or less every possible sort of investigation" (Garff 2005: 232).

⁵ I have kept the theme of the relationship of the self to the natural environment to a minimum in the interpretation, but for both Dickinson and Kierkegaard it is certainly a fertile field for new readings. The Danish philosopher in his *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (dan. *Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen Under Himlen*, 1849) takes up the theme of the relationship between "creature" and "Creator" (cf. Pattison 2012).

The story, whose *spiritus movens* is Constantius and the “young man” he directs (“I become very much aware of a young man”), concerns the preparation and “repetition” of a “investigative journey”⁶ to Berlin to relieve what happened in the past: “You can, after all, take a trip to Berlin; you have been there once before, and now you can prove to yourself whether a repetition is possible and what importance it has” (Kierkegaard 1983: 131). But Constantius does not stop there, for he becomes a confidant of the “young man” and his tales of lost/impossible love. *Repetition*, with its polyphonic structure (about which I will write in detail later) does not so much obtain its twin reproduction in Dickinson’s poem, but rather engages into unexpected dialogue:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – too?
 Then there’s a pair of us!
 Don’t tell! They’d advertise – you know!

 How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
 To an admiring Bog!⁷
 (Dickinson 2022: 133; Dickinson 2005: 116–117)

For both Dickinson in her poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” and Kierkegaard in his *Repetition* the attempt to disintegrate identity (and then redefine it) takes the form of dialogic splitting of the self, dissecting the textual self into voices (I, myself, Nobody, you/ Kierkegaard, Constantius, “nameless friend”). Jim von der Heydt states that “Dickinson belongs, with Søren Kierkegaard, to a small school of dead-end epistemological thinkers with a proclivity for intense skepticism. Their epistemological challenge to learning arises from questions that are initially healthy ones” (von der Heydt 2013: 108). By the “healthy” questions he means Immanuel Kant’s structures of perception, the problem of how much is perceived from outside and to what extent it has its origin in one’s mind (von der Heydt 2013: 108).

Having read the poem with its scrutiny of being “Nobody”, one realizes that Dickinson commences the game of defining the human condition with “continual reference” to irony, which is – as Kierkegaard wrote about it (regarding

⁶ Different aspects of their works have been analyzed by Carole Ann Taylor (Taylor 1978), Elisa New (New 1993), Jim von der Heydt (Von der Heydt 2013), James McIntosh (McIntosh 2013). For Kierkegaard one of the philosophical tasks was to confront Hegel’s systemic thought. Daniel Fineman, on the other hand, certifies that Dickinson’s poetry “appears to realize in miniature the Hegelian trajectory of history: they gain a new object and enlarged vision out of the progressive cancellation of their own initial foci” (Fineman 2013: 85).

⁷ Constantius suggests: “For he is determined to do the best he can, and yet this deception, if she is self-loving, will push her the most severely. He treats her with all possible erotic solicitude, and yet this method will be most painful to her if she herself is self-loving” (Kierkegaard 1983: 144).

Socrates) – “an existence form”⁸ (Howland 2015: 25). I argue that the initial verse and formula (“I’m Nobody”) is a poetic gesture signifying a practice of self-reduction, an impersonation of the role of existence without properties. This role, impossible to perform in everyday life (and Dickinson asserts she does not prefer the dreary visibility of “Somebody”) is reminiscent of Socratic questions, distracting what is certain and constant. Being Nobody, as much as being Somebody, is not unequivocally negative or positive. Again, the mentioned dynamic has been brought by Constantin Constantius (*Report by Constantin Constantius*) in a theatrical costume: “Move on, you drama of life – let no one call it a comedy, no one a tragedy, for no one saw the end! Move on, you drama of existence, where life is not given again any more than money is!” (Kierkegaard 1983: 176).

In Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*, which is a philosophical work and a novel in the form of confessions made by the author, fictional Constantin Constantius, who, as one of many of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms⁹ emphasizes the dynamic and processualism of life. The second part of this work has been divided between Constantinus (*Incidental Observations, Concluding Letter*) and letters of “the Young Man”, who calls himself ‘a nameless friend’, addressing his correspondence to a “a silent confidant” (“My Silent Confidant”). In a letter dated October 11th he states:

What could be gained if I did say something – there is no one who understands me. My pain and my suffering are nameless, even as I myself am nameless, one who, although he has no name, nevertheless may always be something to you and in any case remains. *Your devoted.* (Kierkegaard 1983: 203)

Both figures, Constantin and the “nameless friend”, are equally identical and non-identical, so that Kierkegaard – like Dickinson – achieves the vivid relationality of being a “Nobody”, a type of textual (and existential) presence which is convenient for building the distance from the “self” together with the study of the variety of relations shaping the identity: “myself and Nobody”, “myself and others”, “Nobody and others”, “Nobody and Somebody”. In his *Concluding Letters* Constantius names “You” and “I” created by the plurality of presences. When addressing the “Dear Reader” the pseudonymous and quasi-real author plainly confess: “Although you are indeed fictional, you are by no means a plurality to me but only one, and therefore we are just you and I” (Kierkegaard 1983: 225). Nevertheless, the dialogical nature of Dickinson’s world becomes clear when the presence of “I”

⁸ By “psychical condition” I mean religious-spiritual, not mystical. “Spirit” is, as James McIntosh points out, part of Dickinson’s mature thinking, which takes the form of an “idiosyncratic synthesis” (McIntosh 2013: 153), along with her focus on death and suffering, the celebration of the world created by God, the exploration of the Trinity and immortality.

⁹ Constantius writes about the journey as an existential experiment: “I shall not dwell any longer on such examples but shall to proceed a little of the investigative journey I made to test the possibility and meaning of repetition. Without anyone’s knowing about it (lest any gossip render me incapable of the experiment and in another way weary of repetition) [...]” (Kierkegaard 1983: 150).

and “you” marks the beginning and end of the first verse, evocative and intense at the same time: “**I**m Nobody! Who are **you**?”. They become a supposed pair in the third verse (“there’s a pair of us”), even if Dickinson’s lyrical interlocutor does not respond. Waiting for an answer is coupled with an equally intense desire to ask a question, as in the celebrated poem “This is my letter to the world”:

This is my letter to the World
 That never wrote to Me –
 The simple News that Nature told –
 With tender Majesty [...] ¹⁰
 (Dickinson 2022: 211; Dickinson 2005: 235)

The gesture of writing a letter (with the embodiment of addressee and recipient) to the world is no less theatrical than the structure of dialogue and monologue (simultaneously) of the poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”. Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau, examining the influence of Shakespeare’s works on the “self” of Dickinson’s lyric, points to the poet’s constant play with Victorian convention to entertain her potential audience:

If Dickinson – both in the creation of her public persona and of a “multifaceted” poetic self – seems to be playing a game of hide and seek with her audience, by exhibiting a recluse persona, and by showcasing an evasive voice in her poems, the lyrical game is also playing with the idea of the legitimacy of its audience. (Chevrier-Bosseau 2010: 9)

Theatrical convention problematizes the presence of “I”, and makes it even more complicated. Kierkegaard, using Constantius’ *Report*, proposes the image of the visit to the theater as a form of impossible repetition and wearing the mask of Nobody: “You have gone to the theatre not as a tourist, not as an esthete and critic but, if possible, as a nobody, and you are satisfied to sit as comfortably and well, almost as well, as in your own living room” (Kierkegaard 1983: 165). Variable in its materiality, the vibrancy of the theater, where each performance and each evening are different, even though the directed structure remains the same, describes the inner dynamics of “repetition”. Martijn Boven, examining *Repetition* in its performative potential, certifies that Kierkegaard cultivates “a theatre of ideas in which philosophical and existential problems are performed rather than represented” (Boven 2018: 117). It is apparent that Constantius’ trip to Berlin portrays repetition

¹⁰ John D. Caputo claims that Kierkegaard himself is “nobody”: “As the author, he argued, he himself is nobody, as good as dead, infinitely light relative to the gravity of the reader’s existential fate. [...] He used pseudonyms not because he was sceptic but because he regarded the author as a matter of ‘indifference’, for what is said in these books has nothing to do with whether the author wears a hat (or has uneven trouser legs)” (Caputo 2008: 6). Mark C. Taylor recreates the meaning of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms for his legacy (cf. Taylor 1975).

in a social and psychological dimension (sketches on theatre), problematizing what has been established by (and within) its philosophical structure.

Both complication and dynamism in communicational instances are equally multipronged in Dickinson's poem, especially in the instances when it is based on negative statements ("Nobody", "don't tell"). "Don't tell," however, may not be so much about the relationship with "them" as it is a conscious entry into the order of "Nothing." Dickinson asks: "Who are you", and later: "Are You – Nobody – Too", trying to bridge the distance between "I" and "you" by creating a bridge of shared experience. At the same time, it attempts to tame the complicated presence of "you". The separately written particle of "Too" seems to indicate a slow, tentative pursuit of a punchline, after the word to which "you" could respond. Then it would turn out to be radically different. Or – radically similar! Since "Nobody's" identity remains uncertain, it might be the speaker (itself), the reader (both current and prospective), God or any form of divine, or non-human nature (materialized by "a frog").

"Nobody", when one's identity personifies it, might be a figuration of "recollection" and "repetition", a division which Kierkegaard explores in particular. Joakim Garff states that "the two different directions are represented by two figures" (Garff 2005: 233). Constantin Constantinus represents "the wrong repetitions", as a book narrator and also "a character in his own tale, embarking among many other things, on an expedition to Berlin in a rash attempt to ascertain the actual extent of repetition" (Garff 2005: 233). Even if his pieces of advice offered to the young man, a depressed person "sufficiently occupied with himself" (Kierkegaard 1983: 135), are problematic, the narrator and the observer, perform a part of "nobody", someone "unnoticed".¹¹

3. Nobody as a Project

Although Kierkegaard's and Dickinson's writings actively destabilize the "self", their comparison can be questioned, especially since Dickinson's poem does not refer to the past. "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" is firmly rooted in the here and now, reinforced by poetic minimalism along with the use of the present tense. When one thinks of "repetition" as a fertile formula hidden in the Dickinson's verse, it is indispensable to interpret those features as "actuality, which has been":

The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been – otherwise it could not be repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. [...] when one says that life is repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. (Kierkegaard 1983: 149)

¹¹ I will refer to the both editions of Dickinson's poems in the main text. In footnotes, I indicate the line number of the Ralph William Franklin (F) and Thomas H. Jonston (J) editions. J, 657; F, 466.

Dickinson's assertion of being as Nobody, or indeed being as the state and process of "nobodiness" enacts the selfsame paradox as Kierkegaard's "coming into existence". This linguistic game not only emphasizes a corporeal aspect of one's identity, but also its processual core, which performs and activates rather than offers explanations. Again, even if Dickinson does not define who or what "Nobody" is (or even what it means to be "Nobody"), she creates a counterpoint, which is not the negative reverse of previous process: "how dreary – to be – Somebody." "Being Somebody" gives voice to practice inattentiveness and emphasizes not to format "nobodiness" in the shape of "somebodiness", which by both Kierkegaard and Dickinson might be defined as "public appearance" ("How public"). When Constantius suggests to the "young man" a plan on how to "get back" the lost girl and at the same time take revenge on her,¹² by provoking jealousy, he writes explicitly about public performance: "He was supposed to appear with her [a new companion – M.K.] in public places" (Kierkegaard 1983: 144). The introspective process of (impossible) "repetition" along with intellectual penetration is by its very nature intimate. The "public" theatricality of presenting oneself as "somebody", might be a counterpoint for confronting the individuality of the "self". Writing about the social dynamics of "I'm Nobody! Who are you?", Betsy Erkkilä describes the poem as a sign of the public and "noisy" culture of democracy, "of stump speech and camp meeting" (Erkkilä 2004: 151). Such "meaningless noise" is one of the evils Kierkegaard seeks to counter in *Repetition*: "If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise" (Kierkegaard 1983: 149).

When the "self" begins a dialogue ("Who are you?"), it affirms being in the world, while remaining attentive to the various forms of relationships making themselves present in her life.¹³ In this poem Dickinson is not only observing herself in a world marked by the presence of the frog, the swamp and "them" ("they'd advertise"), but it also suspended in the face of another ("you") presence to which the lyrical "I" directs its question. Dickinson's poem stands out for its dialogical (and self-dialogical) minimum. The lyrical "I" strips itself of its properties, confessing: "I'm Nobody". It is a kind of experiment to assume, if only for a moment, such a model of existence, in which it is possible to be "beyond properties". "Nobody" having, after all, a strong linguistic correlation with materiality and corporeality, is here an attempt to think of oneself beyond gender and femininity, body, appearance,

¹² J, 441; F, 519.

¹³ The opening passage certifies: "When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward as an opponent. He literally did come forward, because he did not say a word but merely paced back and forth a few times, thereby assuming that he had sufficiently refuted them" (Kierkegaard 1983: 131). Greek philosophy is a substantial example of "recollection", the term opposed to the titular "repetition". For the Greeks – as Constantius marks – "all knowing is a recollection" (Kierkegaard 1983: 131), whereas "modern philosophy will teach us all life is a repetition" (Kierkegaard 1983: 131). Rick Anthony Furtak presented Kierkegaard's studies of ancient Greek thought and their influence on his philosophy (Furtak 2013).

identifying oneself as belonging to people, when the presence of "a frog" is no less prominent. Dickinson's identity tends to initiate situations joining the "self" with environment, even if seemingly she presents her "I" as the one who wants to hide:

I hide myself within my flower,
That fading from your Vase,
You, unsuspecting, feel for me –
Almost a loneliness.¹⁴
(Dickinson 2022: 427; Dickinson 2005: 47)

Here, as in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?", the central dialogical part has been transcribed in the voices of "me" ("I hide myself within my flower") and "you" ("You, unsuspecting, feel for me"). When analyzing "myself" in a different verse, Dickinson even confesses that "me" assaults "myself":

Me from Myself – to banish –
Had I Art –
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart –

But since Myself – assault Me –
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication –
Me – of Me?¹⁵
(Dickinson 2022: 318–319; Dickinson 2005: 317)

Those poetical experiments with the "self" are reminiscent of laboratory practices, to which one submits one's subjectivity to analyze ("Me from Myself – to banish –").¹⁶ Nobody as a project can be described as a form of ethical exercise involving the removal of the "self" in order to be able to weaken one's own construction and bring out 'for oneself' the unknown. That which has the potential to transform a certain (and therefore less susceptible to criticism) way of being.

¹⁴ In his *Report* Constantius writes: "In dealing with a depressed person, one often learns most from his subordinates, because a depressed person often opens up more to a servant, a maid, an old unnoticed dependent in a family than to someone of similar culture and station" (Kierkegaard 1983: 139).

¹⁵ J, 288; F, 260.

¹⁶ *Fear and Trembling. Dialectical Lyric*, "written by" Johannes de Silentio, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, is a philosophical work describing the life of Abraham and his attempt to kill his son, Isaac, as a result of a God's command. Dickinson raised this subject directly in her poem "Abraham to kill him" (Kierkegaard 2022: 571) (J, 1317).

To find the relationship with the world, one needs to allow oneself to lose it: "I lost a World – the other day!/ Has Anybody found?" (Dickinson 2022: 86). The earthly element thus conceived reveals itself just as clearly in Kierkegaard's work, when thought penetrates the self in relation to the rich relationality defined as the world. When performing repetition Constantius confesses: "My body had lost its terrestrial gravity; it was as if I had no body [...]" (Kierkegaard 1983: 173). And then, he uses a paradoxical parallel to demonstrate that "repetition", even if impossible, has been fulfilled: "My being was transparent, like the depths of the sea, like the self-satisfied silence of the night, like the soliloquizing stillness of midday" (Kierkegaard 1983: 173).¹⁷

In "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" Dickinson problematizes the act of speaking, which becomes an image of adjudication of oneself, a kind of construction that determines one's identity, and also allows others to form an opinion about someone else. In this sense, the formula "how public" is an act of setting in motion what rights a group of people, a society, has to make judgments about an individual. This opposition in the poem is evident. In stanza one, "we" (that is, "I-Nobody" and "you" – Nobody) confront "they" ("they'd advertise"), while in the second stanza the poem considers the relationship between "we" ("there's a pair of us") and what is public ("how public"). "Public" seems to mean known, belonging to the majority, subject to the dictates of the majority, commonplace, but also noisy, overplayed.

"Nobody", this disturbing presence of the poem,¹⁸ can be a recognized form of divinity. "Who are you" asks the question of the "I," while at the same time wondering if God will also take on the characteristics of "Nobody". Here, too, Dickinson seems to challenge the order, asking about the amorphous, incorporeal and extra-sexual essence of what belongs to the divine. Interestingly, the question is left unanswered, and thus the "I," being unsure of who and what it sees, merely assumes that perhaps reality and its deus bears the characteristics of a "Nobody". This relation, as she points out in another poem, is based on a hunch ("you know"), not on observation.

In the final stanza, the lyrical "I" once again invokes "telling" ("To tell one's name") to periodize its "public" dimension, which is to be illustrated by the "frog" ("like a Frog"). Confessing one's name is not equivalent to the action of a frog, but it turns out to be apparent. The frog is precisely not public, although the general perception seems to be that knowledge of it is locked into a rigid, certain framework. Meanwhile, the frog does not speak its name. The person reading only becomes familiar with the fact that it is a frog. Just as the term "Nobody" can evoke an unspecified woman, person, God. If it is "public" to say frog, it seems to be

¹⁷ J, 903; F, 80.

¹⁸ J, 642; F, 709.

about a form of feeling that the world as a whole, as a certain system of meanings and existences appropriates knowledge of us. However, this is about the world of other-than-human nature.¹⁹

4. Existential Exercise and Possibility. Conclusion

When the matrix of "ready answers and completed philosophical projects" is superimposed on the works of Kierkegaard and Dickinson, reading both works will end in unqualified disappointment. For the work of Kierkegaard is a project, a psychological and ethical one, thanks to which "impossible repetition" becomes not so much a meaningless act of masochistic pleasure of milling around, but an exercise in confronting "oneself" with various moments of existence, with the world. Dickinson's poem functions similarly. Open to interpretation and anchored in the you and now, it constantly performs an action that, through the figure of Nobody, is itself a repetition, a profound search for a relationship with oneself, with the world, with the environment, with the divine.

Both works are open-ended existential projects that point to human activity as a constant search, which should be a creative expansion of one's ethical imagination, an individual effort more than a recipe for life. Having called Kierkegaard's project a lyrical Christianity, Elisa New stated that poetry is a particularly hospitable matter for theological speculation (New 1993: 159–162), through which not only God is debated, but also who the "self" is in relation to itself, the world and others (and therefore to the divine).

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –²⁰
(Dickinson 2022: 657; Dickinson 2005: 215)

¹⁹ Dickinson also recalls this figure in another poem:

"I've non to tell me but Thee
So when Thou failest, nobody.
It was a little tie –
It just held Two, nor those it held
Since Somewhere thy sweet Face has spilled
Beyond my Boundary – [...]"
(Dickinson 2022: 418; Dickinson 2005: 397).

²⁰ I refer to Søren Kierkegaard's dissertation *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (org. *Om Begrebet Ironi med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates*) defended in 1841. As Jacob Howland summarizes: "Kierkegaard's dissertation reveals the truth of irony to be an existence form rather than, as its title would seem to announce, a theoretical structure. Its most important teaching consists not in an argument, but an enactment – a demonstration of erotic attunement to the soul of Socrates, and thus the ethical openness to other individuals that is essential to Socrates philosophizing" (Howland 2015: 25–26).

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