

"Imaginative Geography": Orientalist Discourse in *Paradise Lost*

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(Received: 29 Oct. 2008, Accepted: 13 Jan. 2010)

Abstract

Paradise Lost incorporates many references to the East. The Orient figures prominently in the vast scope – the "imaginative geography" - of the poem. This paper attempts a survey of what, following Edward Said, has been termed "orientalist discourse" in Milton's epic poem. It is argued that this discourse has to be considered in the context of Milton's essentially religious and anti-monarchical stance. Associating the Orient with evil and the Satanic regime *Paradise Lost* cannot be wrested from "latent orientalism" but it is shown that issues such as aesthetic considerations, a cosmic setting, drawing on the authority of history, classicism, an encyclopedic scope, an essential anti-monarchism and above all a profound process of displacement whereby comments on contemporary issues are displaced onto the Orient all help compound the representations of the East in this text. The result is an ambiguous and multi-faceted orientalist discourse.

Key Words: Milton, *Paradise Lost*, the Orient, Orientalist Discourse, Colonialist Discourse.

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Introduction

Edward Said's pivotal thesis in *Orientalism* is that texts of orientalism 'can create not only knowledge but also the very reality that they appear to describe' (1978, p. 94). Orientalism is above all 'a style of thought,' (ibid, p. 2) a way of thinking about and "imagining" the East. Elsewhere Said writes of the "imaginative geography of 'our land-their land' variety" which is a way of "designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' " via which human societies seem to "derive a sense of their identities negatively" (1978, p. 54). The orient figures quite noticeably in *Paradise lost* and *Paradise Regained*. This paper is concerned with Milton's "imaginative geography" of the Orient in *Paradise Lost*. In a survey of the representations of the East in *Paradise Lost* it is argued that Milton's orientalist discourse, which in itself reveals some deep-seated conceptions about the East, serves to refract the author's political views and sharpens the thematics and imagery of his poem. Of course, it is also noted that these images of the East are aesthetically functional too. As such, the notion of orientalism as a discourse of Western hegemony is compounded.

Although no comprehensive study of the representations of the East in Milton is done to date, a number of scholars have touched upon the issue. Martin Evans's *Milton's Imperial Epic, Paradise Lost and the Discourse of Colonialism* (1996) is probably the most comprehensive single study approaching the subject. But the focus, as the title indicates, is colonialist rather than orientalist discourse. Davies (1983), Zwicker (1987), Lim (1993), Quint (1993) and Stevens (1997) discuss the issue along similar lines. Oddly, for a discussion of representations of the East in Milton per se one has to refer back to Samuel Chew's *The Crescent and the Rose* (1937), a monumental work which traces the representations of the Islamic East in Renaissance Europe. The present article aims at discussing the significance of such representations in Milton's epic poem.

Discussion

One of the striking aspects of *Paradise Lost* and, to a lesser extent, *Paradise*

Regained is their wealth of geographical detail, their truly vast 'imaginative geography,' as Said puts it, including almost all the known world as well as the 'discovered' lands of that time. The vast geographical perspectives of *Paradise Lost* embrace Asia, Africa, Europe and Americas (from "Cambalu...And Samarchand by Oxus..." to "Agra...Mosco...Mombaza, and Quiloa, and Melind...On Europe...Rich Mexico...El Dorado"¹), lands imagined and real, charted and uncharted. The East of course figures prominently in this grandiose setting.

To begin with, why include Milton in the orientalist canon at all? What were the reasons for, and what purposes were served by, the inclusion of the matter the Orient in *Paradise Lost* (and its sequence, *Paradise Regained*)? Why does the Orient figure so significantly in what can be called the geographical or cartographical discourse of these poems?

It is no wonder to find Orientalia in a poem which, to use Barbara Lewalski's words, has "an edenic profusion of thematic and structural elements" (199, p. 113). The orientalist discourse is arguably deep-seated, embedded in the structure and buried within the allusive texture of these poems. Figuring, however, in the work of, as Alistair Fowler (1998, p. 41) puts it, "one of the most politically engaged of all [English] poets," in texts which are, in Tony Davies' phrase, "the battleground of competing ideologies," (1992, p. 22) this discourse has to be considered in negotiation with other discourses circulating at the time of the production of these texts. Here the New Historicist notion of the literary text is useful -- the idea that literary texts to some extent map the discourses circulating at the time they are written and, to some sense, are themselves part of these discourses. This figuration can be accounted for in a number of ways.

First of all, these images of the East are aesthetically of significance. Critics have noted the abundance of proper names, geographical and otherwise, in *Paradise Lost*. Fowler (1998, p. 21) discusses T. S. Eliot's and F. R. Leavis' treatment of the

1- Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1998), l.420-23. Further references are to this edition and are cited in the text with *Paradise Lost* abbreviated as *PL*.

" 'roll-call' of names as having only a vague atmospheric or auditory value" and goes on to explain how the recent study of theological and historical contexts shows that "every naming...is sharply edged." But this idea of "atmospheric or auditory value," is, we think, something quite relevant to the discussion of orientalism in these poems. "Samarchand" (once a celebrated city in the Persian empire), "Cambalu," "Ecbatan" (*PL*, XI. 391) (an ancient capital of Persia), "Hispanan" (*PL*, XI. 392) (the capital of Persia in the Safavid era, at Milton's time) are names, which, apart from other associations, are sonorous, evocative, even romantic. The note of wealth, exoticism and glory associated with the earthly kingdoms is certainly there, but one is conduced to assume that these oriental, along with the non-oriental ("Quiola," 'El Dorado," etc.), names to some extent are there to achieve atmospheric and sound effects befitting an epic on a cosmic scale.

Also, these texts claim to render universal themes, the story of man's creation, his fall and his final redemption. These themes are presented on a cosmic scale. Furthermore, the poems treat biblical stories and the biblical lands are located in the East. For instance, "With these came they, who from the bordering flood / Of old Euphrates to the brook that parts / Egypt from Syrian ground..." (*PL*, I.420-23).

Milton was also writing in the late Renaissance, a time of cartographical awareness, a time of, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, "heightened interest in boundaries" (1980, p. 11). It was a time of exploration, map-making and discovery. These boundaries, however, were mostly blurred and many parts of the globe were to the West an "as yet unavailable *terra incognita*" with "its people and customs often the product of European fable, fourth-hand report" (Davies, 1991, p. 123). The Renaissance discourses of exploration, discovery and cartography, then, impinged on Milton's conception of geographical places as the, to use Stevie Davies' words, "inconclusive" geography of *Paradise Lost* evidences (*ibid.*).

This geographical discourse, with its inclusion of diverse lands, many of them Eastern, is intertwined with the thematics of these poems. For instance, in Book XI of *Paradise Lost* there is a catalogue of the Eastern empires. Adam is shown

The seat
Of mightiest empire, from the destined walls
Of Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Khan
To Paquin of Sinaean kings and thence
To Agra and Lahor of great mogul
Down to the golden Chersones, or where
The Persian in Ecbatan sat, or since
In Hispahan, or where the Russian Czar
In Mosco, or the Sultan in Bizance.
Turchestan born; (XI.386-96)

Fowler (1998, p. 23) observes that here there is a sort of "topomorphic" or "spatial" pattern. Such patterns, he adds, in *Paradise Lost* often imply "symbolism of sovereignty -- not of course to dignify human monarchy, but rather to affirm Christ's kingship and the moral hierarchy of creation." Chersones, identified with Ophir, which supplied Solomon, the only biblical ruler mentioned in the poem, with gold, is centrally placed, flanked with "the Mogul's and the Persian's realms, each with two capitals; then the Sinaean kings' and Czar's, each with one capital" (Fowler, 1998, p. 618). The matter of the Orient is used to drive home the focal theme of the poem: the denunciation of worldly kingship and underscoring God's sovereignty. The orientalism of the poem here is inseparable from its thematics, it helps give aesthetic form to it.

Classical, biblical and contemporary allusions

The matter of the orient incorporates images of exoticism, splendour and wealth, kingship and despotism and barbarism at a deeper level (in Stevie Davies' words, images of "formless, chaotic masses of beings on the borders of the human, barbarians who pour down upon civilization..." (1983, p. 93)). One way to approach these images and allusions, we propose, is to group them into three main frameworks (which at times overlap): classical, biblical and contemporary. These

allusions are part and parcel of the central theme of Milton's epic poem: the denunciation of worldly kingship and the glorification of the "Kingdom of Heaven." Here is, for instance, an image of oriental luxury and splendour used in describing the Pandaemonium:

Not Babylon,
Nor great Alcairo, such magnificence
Equalled in all their glories, to enshrine
Belus or Serapis their gods, or seat
Their kings, when Egypt with Assyria strove
In wealth and luxury. (I.716-21)

The pagan East is depicted in its Satanic luxury. The above image is about an ancient, pre-Christian era, the following is that of a more contemporary one. Satan's regiment throng when a council is proclaimed in hell:

They anon
With hundreds and with thousands trooping came
Attended: all access was thronged, the gates
And porches wide, but chief the spacious hall
(Though like a covered field, where champions bold
Wont ride in armed, and at the soldan's chair
Defied the best of paynim chivalry
To mortal combat or career with lance) (*PL*, I.759-66)

"Soldan," resonating with associations of tyranny and cruelty, and "paynim" are markers of orientalist discourse here. The image is specifically that of the Islamic Orient and to be more exact that of the Turkish rulers. Elsewhere the Satanic council is likened to the typical oriental state councils. Satan re-enters the Pandemonium: "Their mighty chief returned: loud was the acclaim: / Forth rushed in haste the great consulting peers, / Raised from their dark divan, and with like joy" (*PL*, X. 455-57). "Divan" is a Persian word that, among other things, means a state council as well as,

ironically, a council of justice. The alliterative "dark divan," resonating with overtones of corruption continues the implications of the previous image..

The devils can also be likened to an obscure people somewhere in the East:

So thick the airy crowd
Swarmed and were straitened; till the signal given,
Behold a wonder! They but now who seemed
In bigness to surpass Earth's giant sons
Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room
Throng numberless, like that pygmean race
Beyond the Indian mountain, (*PL*, I.775-81)

The oriental motif continues and the "numberless" devils are likened to a barbarous Oriental people from beyond the mountains, "formless, chaotic beings." This blurred geography is invoked in a series of epic similes associating Oriental territories with the Satanic regime. For instance, the encounter between Satan and Death (his son by his daughter Sin) is described as the collision of two clouds over the Caspian in the north of Persia (*PL*, II.714-16). Or, Satan's roaming of the earth is described as follows:

Here walked the fiend at large in spacious field,
As when a vulture on Imaus bred,
Whose snowy ridge the roving Tartar bounds,
Dislodging from the region scarce of prey
To gorge the flesh of lambs or yearling kids
On hills where flocks are fed, flies toward the springs
Of Ganges or Hydaspes, Indian streams; (*PL*, III.430-36)

However, oriental realms are not always associated with Satan and hell. Images of the exotic Orient are deployed to describe heaven as well; heaven's balmy scents are likened to:

As when to them who sail
Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are past
Mozambic, oft at sea north-east winds blow
Sabean odours from the spicy shore
Of Arabie the blest, with such delay
Well pleased they slack their course, and many a league
Cheered with the grateful smell old Ocean smiles. (*PL*, IV.159-65)

Several discourses overlap here. "Cape of Hope" and "Mozambic" as well as the whole of this nautical image are markers of a discourse of mercantilism and discovery dominant at that time. "Sabean odours" betokens the biblical discourse (Saba being a biblical land) and "Arabie" marks orientalist discourse. The oriental image of the passage helps create a sort of atmospheric effect, something related to the aesthetics of the text in general that will be discussed at some length later. Likewise is the description of the scene in which Eve picks the delicacies of the Heaven: "Whatever earth all-bearing mother yields / In India east or west, or middle shore / In Pontus or the Punic coast," (*PL*, V.338-40). The East is imaged as a locale of edenic profusion and abundance. One more image of this kind, again specifically of India, is used in the scene in which Adam and Eve cover themselves with fig leaves: "The fig tree, not that kind for fruit renowned, / But such as this day to Indians known / In Malabar or Decan spreads her arms" (*PL*, IX.1101-103). Fowler (1998, p. 502) notes that Purchas could be the possible source for this image. The deictic "this day" shows the wide circulation and direct stamp of the discourses of exploration and mercantilism, the Hakluyt and Purchas collections, on the Miltonic text. Such images indicate that much of the orientalism of the text under discussion is engaged with the aforesaid discourses rather than the discourse of colonialism.

To highlight the significance of such images we proceed to our proposed classification (classical, biblical and contemporary). An important instance of the classical framework is the allusion to Xerxes' Greek expedition. Sin and Death

build a bridge over the chaos linking hell and earth:

Over the foaming deep high arched, a bridge
Of length prodigious joining to the wall
Immovable of this now fenceless world
Forfeit to Death; from hence a passage broad,
Smooth, easy, inoffensive down to hell.
So, if great things to small may be compared,
Xerxes, the liberty of Greece to yoke,
From Susa his Memnonian palace high
Came to the sea, and over Hellespont
Bridging his way, Europe with Asia joined,
And scourged with many a stroke the indignant waves. (*PL*, X. 306-11)

Milton is here drawing on Aeschylus and Herodotus. Susa (the winter palace of the Persian kings known to the Greeks as Memnonia after Memnon, the son of the dawn, Aurora) is analogous to hell and Xerxes to Sin and Death, the offspring of Satan. On the aptness of this image, Fowler (1998, p. 557) observes that "Death and Xerxes both build bridges, intend to subdue nations, are proud and strike the deep." The passage reproduces two of the salient *topoi* of the classical Greek writers' discourse on Persia, tyranny and pride. These two *topoi* are specifically highlighted. Xerxes builds his bridge "the liberty of Greece to yoke" and his overweening pride makes him scourge the sea in indignation. The reproduction and recirculation of these *topoi* empower and authorise the Miltonic text. Moreover, as Xerxes' invasion of Greece, recorded in Herodotus, is regarded as a historical fact, the passage also draws on the discourse of history and hence doubly empowers the text. *Paradise Lost*, says Mary Radzinowicz (1987, p. 206), is "a course in political education." Milton tries to "educate" his readers by underlining the inseparable link between tyranny and kingship through the discourse of history. Milton's use of the matter of the Orient, then, is related to his particular conception of history as his works, holds C. A. Patrides (1997, p. 269), are "the most successful attempt in poetry to fuse the

essential aspects of the Christian view of history into a magnificent whole...Above all we have the universalistic and Christocentric view of history." Milton suggests, and "educates" his readers as to the fact, that history shows that except the one true sovereign, Christ, all kings are fraudulent and tyrannical.

This classical-orientalist discourse is also related to what can be termed Milton's display of erudition. In a seminal essay on the relationship between politics and the literary culture in the Restoration, Steven Zwicker (1987, p. 259) shows how Milton tried to give authority to his voice by drawing on "the language of cultural authority -- Scriptures, the classics, scholarship, history, literary learning." Milton, the staunch champion of the overthrown republic, surrounded by his Royalist enemies, was trying to assert his voice, "out of humiliation and political displacement, out of the need to assert the authority of his voice came the epic scope of this poem" (Zwicker, 1987, p. 248). The Orientalia of *Paradise Lost* (as well as those of its sequel, *Paradise Regained*), the bits and pieces of "knowledge" about the history, geography and customs of the East, come out of these languages of "cultural authority." As regards the aforementioned wealth of geographical detail in these works, Milton's attempt at an encyclopaedic scope had to incorporate cartography as well as it was an important field of knowledge and erudition at that time. To return to the image under discussion, there is a resort both to the discourse of history (Herodotean account of the Greco-Persian wars) as well as that of the classics (Aeschylean account), which here happen to be more or less overlapping. Here, as in *Paradise Regained*, the orientalism of the text gives an edge to its pivotal theme, an indictment of all kingship except the kingdom of God. This brings us to the discussion of a cluster of images of kingship and empire that comprise many of the allusions to the Orient.

As critics have noted, kingship in Milton's two major works is mostly associated with the satanic regime. For instance: "Satan, whom now transcendent glory raised / Above his fellows, with monarchical pride" (*PL*, II.426-28). Or: "Thus saying rose / The monarch [Satan]" (*PL*, II.466-67). Satan is also called the

devils' "great emperor" (*PL*, I.379). Perhaps the best encapsulation of Milton's view of the kings is the scene in which Adam in his vision denounces Nimrod:

O execrable son so to aspire
Above his brethren, to himself assuming
Authority usurped, from God not given:
He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl
Domination absolute'; that right we hold
By his donation; but man over men
He made not lord; such title to himself
Reserving, human left from human free (*PL*, XII.64-71)

The denunciation of kingship is mediated through biblical (the above example), classical (the image of Xerxes' expedition, for instance) as well as contemporary frameworks. In the following lines Satan and his fellowship are imaged as a sultan and his host:

As when the potent rod
Of Amram's son in Egypt's evil day
Waved round the coast, up called a pitchy cloud
Of locusts, warping on the eastern wind,
That o'er the realm of the impious Pharaoh hung
Like night and darkened all the land of Nile:
So numberless were those bad angels seen
Hovering on wing under the cope of hell
'Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding fires;
Till, as a signal givn, the uplifted spear
Of their great Sultan waving to direct (*PL*, I.338-48)

The biblical story of a tyrant leads to the contemporary realities of the sultans. The "numberless" host of "bad angels" are like the overwhelming army of the Turkish sultans invading Christendom. The images of kingship run through

Paradise Lost and *Paradise Regained* driving home the central theme of the indictment of the fraudulent kings of history and the glorification of the kingdom of Heaven. Stevie Davies (1991, p. 29) sums this up as follows:

It is through the reiterated image of the king of this world that Milton embodied in *Paradise Lost* this cyclical pattern of corruption in human life. Once Satan has been established as the archetype of vitiated kingship...the image is extended through a kind of family or chain of subsidiary kings invading all time and all space, from Moloch to Pharaoh to Charles I.

For a Europe embattled with the Ottomans, the image of sultan resonated with menace and dread associations. The aforementioned image of Satan as a sultan at war well conveys these associations; taking into consideration the menace of the Turks as lived experience for Milton's readers, it was the most chilling image that he could have invoked. Davies (1991, p. 51) notes how the Royalists and the Roundheads in their mutual recriminations called each other the "Turk." For an embattled West these images of the sultan could also be "a test of grace in which readers find themselves. If the West cannot stand against the Sultan, how far can the Christian soul resist Satan?" (Davies, 1991, p. 55) Furthermore, Milton's universalistic view of history had to include the vituperation of all kings throughout history

Another important aspect of what we termed "contemporary framework" is the stamp of mercantile and "discovery" accounts collected by Hakluyt (1589) and later Samuel Purchas (1625) in *Paradise Lost*. As Martin Green (1979, p. 41) maintains, although these accounts were mercantile in character at that time, they were still a form of propaganda providing the "energising myth" of English imperialism; "English propaganda was mercantile in character; and hence it was England that had a Hakluyt and later a Defoe." The following image is another instance of the impingement of mercantilism on the Miltonic text and Milton's attitude towards it, Satan's voyage to reach the gate of Heaven is described

As when far off at sea a fleet descried
Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds
Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles
Of Ternate and Tidore, whence merchants bring
Their spicy drugs: they on the trading flood
Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape
Ply stemming nightly toward the pole. So seemed
Far off the flying fiend: (*PL*, II.636-43)

Is the association of mercantilism with the Satanic regime indicative of Milton's criticism and disapproval of, in Tony Davies' words, "the revolutionary energies of expansive colonial capitalism?" (1992, p. 252) Paul Stevens (1997, p. 8) argues that, as with colonialism, Milton only disapproves of mercantile excess.

In the most extensive study of the idea of colonialism in *Paradise Lost*, Martin Evans discusses the poem's corollary of orientalist discourse: colonial discourse. He pinpoints the ways in which the poem on a cosmic stage re-enacts many of the salient themes of colonial encounters and conquests. In Evans' words, "Milton's version of the genesis myth resonates with the complex thematics of Renaissance colonialism" (1996, pp. 4-5). These texts were, then, concerned, apart from the internal politics, with politics in general including the colonial politics and the East-West encounters manifested in the matter of the Orient. Orientalism and colonialism, in Said's account, are supposed to be consciously or unconsciously in collusion. However, in its explicit form the colonial discourse in these texts mostly focuses on America and Africa, where colonial activities were well under way. It is implicit with regard to the Orient as references to the colonial stance of England apropos the Orient, specifically India, were not manifest at Milton's time and were in large part subsumed under a mercantile discourse. Orientalist discourse of the poem, nonetheless, in depicting the East as a locus of untold riches and drawing on and interrogating the discourses of mercantilism, exploration and discovery also negotiated with the ideology of European imperialism. As Evans (1996, p. 11)

points out, the first and crucial phase of English empire-building, which was in the New World, was more or less coincident with Milton's life-time. Did Milton approve or disapprove of this ideology?

Here we encounter a number of different critical attitudes. Walter Lim (1993, p. 30) is of the opinion that owing to his disillusionment with the English nation Milton interrogates England's colonial and imperial aspirations but he does so in "poetic narratives controlled by a dominant rhetoric of theological imperialism." David Quint (1993, p. 25) sees *Paradise Lost* as an "indictment of European expansion and colonialism that includes his own countrymen and contemporaries." For Paul Stevens, however, Milton is no anti-colonialist; he does not criticise colonialism per se but only its abuses. His is an ideal colonialism, it is Milton's "very virtue, his desire for civility and his refusal of any thoroughgoing relativism, that makes it so difficult for him to stand outside the discourse of colonialism" (1997, p. 17). The upshot of all this is that Milton's attitude towards the ideology of colonialism is split. According to Evans, there are two colonial narratives in *Paradise lost*, an anti-colonial one, based on the Spanish conquests in the New World, and a pro-colonial one based on the English attempts to settle Virginia and New England. Evans (1996, pp. 141 & 142) traces this bifurcation to the "essentially binary character of English colonial ideology" during most of Milton's life-time, contending that it fits Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical model of Renaissance political discourse in which "a 'subversive' critique of diabolic exploration and conquest is 'contained' by a larger history of divine imperialism in which England's hegemony over its transatlantic possessions is emphatically endorsed." In short, *Paradise Lost* is imprinted with the thematics of colonialism as it is with that of orientalism.

We would call the kind of orientalism with more overt, pronounced imperialist / colonialist assumptions, implications and tendencies "imperialist" orientalism in contrast to a sort of early or "emergent" orientalism which seems to be more "a body of knowledge," an attempt on the part of the West to imagine, map out and finally conceptualise lands and peoples other than itself, the struggle of a culture to come to terms with its oriental others. This of course seems very similar to the distinction

Said (1978, p. 222) makes between "latent" and "manifest" orientalism, the former referring to "an almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity" and the latter to the "various stated views" about things oriental. The differences in the viewpoints about the Orient in different writers can be "characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content" (Said, 1978, p. 206).

Conclusion

To sum up, in dramatising the conflict, ancient and ongoing, between good and evil, one rich stockpile of ideas, images and figures available to Milton was the matter of the Orient. The oriental images and figures woven into the fabric of the vast epic similes help give aesthetic form to the theological concepts, the ideological economy and the thematics of *Paradise Lost*. Reiterated, either explicitly or implicitly, throughout this text, specifically as regards the images of kingship, the matter of the East helps unify the symbolics of Milton's epic. The frequent association of the Orient with evil and the satanic regime indicates that, in the final analysis, it cannot be completely wrested from what Said calls "latent Orientalism," which Milton inherits and empowers. But, issues such as aesthetic considerations, disregarded in Edward Said's account; a cosmic setting and background; drawing on the authority of history and a universalist, Christocentric view of it; the complex negotiation with a multiplicity of other discourses circulating at that time; classicism and an attempt at an encyclopaedic scope; the vilification of all kingship through all time and space and, above all, a profound process of displacement whereby comments on contemporary issues are displaced on to the matter of the Orient all help compound the orientalism of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's representation of the East, his 'imaginative geography', an instance of the complex interweaving of culture and power, exemplifies the uncanny shaping power of representing the Other on the 'imagination' of a great writer.

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