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**ONE SANG THE BODY ELECTRIC:
 THE TWENTIETH CENTURY RUSSIAN AND BULGARIAN
 APPROACHES TO TRANSLATING THE POETICS OF WHITMAN**

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N. Kamovnikova, K. Ivleva. One Sang the Body Electric: The Twentieth Century Russian and Bulgarian Approaches to Translating the Poetics of Whitman. The article focuses on four translations of Walt Whitman's poem *I Sing the Body Electric* into Russian and Bulgarian by Balmont, Zenkevich, Stoyanov, Svintila. The choice of the Russian and Bulgarian languages which share historical and cultural experience in their pre-communist, communist and post-communist periods enables us to define the main strategies applied to the highly unconventional poetics of Whitman by his Russian and Bulgarian translators constrained by the rules of the Socialist Realism and the literary canon of different historic periods of the twentieth century. The results obtained demonstrate an evolution of translation approaches to the structure and poetics of the original. poetry, poetics,

Keywords: Balmont, Whitman, translation, Zenkevich, Stoyanov, Svintila.

Н. Камовникова, К. Ивлева. Воспевая электрическое тело: Поэтика Уитмена в интерпретации русских и болгарских переводчиков двадцатого века. В статье рассматривается стихотворение Уолта Уитмена «Я пою электрическое тело» в четырех переводах Бальмонта, Зенкевича, Стоянова, Свинтилы. Выбор русского и болгарского языков, объединенных общим историческим и культурным опытом дореволюционного, коммунистического и посткоммунистического периодов, позволяет определить основные стратегии, применяемые к крайне нетрадиционной поэтике Уитмена его российскими и болгарскими переводчиками, стесненными правилами социалистического реализма и литературных канонов различных исторических периодов XX века. Полученные результаты показывают эволюцию переводческих подходов к структуре и поэтике оригинала.

Ключевые слова: Бальмонт, Зенкевич, перевод, поэзия, поэтика, Свинтила, Стоянов, Уитмен.

Н. Камовнікова, К. Івлева. Оспівуючи електричне тіло: поетика Вітмена в інтерпретації російських і болгарських перекладачів двадцятого століття. У статті розглядається вірш Волта Вітмена «Я співаю електричне тіло» в чотирьох перекладах в Бальмонта, Зенкевича, Стоянова, Свінтіли. Вибір російської та болгарської мов, об'єднаних спільним історичним і культурним досвідом їх дореволюційного, комуністичного і посткомуністичного періодів, дозволяє визначити основні стратегії, що застосовуються до вкрай нетрадиційної поезики Уїтмена його російськими та болгарськими перекладачами, стисненими правилами соціалістичного реалізму і літературного канону різних історичних періодів XX століття. Отримані результати розкривають еволюцію перекладацьких підходів до структури та поезики оригіналу.

Ключові слова: Бальмонт, Вітмен, Зенкевич, переклад, поезія, поетика, Свінтіла, Стоянов.

This article explores four translation projects [Berman 1995: 76-77] of Walt Whitman's poem *I Sing the Body Electric* into Russian and Bulgarian during the pre-communist, communist and post-communist periods. As the Russian and Bulgarian languages have close kinship and the two nations share historical and literary experience, especially in the twentieth century, our objective is to define the main strategies applied by the Russian and Bulgarian translators to a poetic text. Although *I Sing the Body Electric* challenged the Russian and Bulgarian translators in several ways, this article will be particularly focused on its poetical features. In other words, we explore whether and how the formal features of Whitman's poetry fit into the poetic canons of the pre-communist, communist and post-communist periods.

We put an emphasis on the communist era literary horizons of the two countries. We consider that, although the communist years have not been a monolithic period but rather included different sub-periods with a changeable poetic canon, it is yet possible to define the general features of the official poetry in the USSR and Bulgaria. Among the officially advocated themes, such as the courage of the militant, the personal sacrifice for the communist ideas, etc., this canon includes some formal aspects, such as the preference for a more conventional poetry with regular meter rhythm and rhymes, neutral words order, deprived of 'unnecessary' repetitions and inversions. During the communist period these formal features were not explicitly imposed by the literary canon; however, the officially praised poetry was a reliable means of communicating the approved strategies to writers, poets, and translators.

We choose to work on Whitman's text, firstly, because of its unconventional expressivity, which is especially challenging for the authors of the communist period constrained by the rules of the Socialist realism. Secondly, the interest towards Whitman's poetry did not wane with the advent of communism which allows us to explore the continuity of his translations before, during and after this period. In this sense *I Sing the Body Electric* demonstrates an interesting evolution of translation approaches to the structure and poetics of the original.

The poem of Walt Whitman *I Sing the Body Electric* [Whitman 2006: 109-118] has been a part of *Leaves of Grass* since its first edition in 1855. Both in form and content, the poem is a manifest of Whitman's philosophy and an anthem to the powers and beauty of the human body. The concept of *Body Electric* introduced into the poem in 1867 was a final touch to the poetic image, as the adjective *electric* for Whitman was a term to express poetic excitement [Klatt 2008: 321]. The human body is seen by Whitman as a source of inspiration and a conductor of the electrical charge which can be transferred between the bodies joined in one system.

The idea of the human body as a special electric substance was inspired by the lecture of Ralph Waldo Emerson *The Poet*, which Whitman attended in 1842. Emerson spoke about a "power transcending all limit and privacy, by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity" [Emerson 1983: 467]. The fascinating power of electricity embraces all dimensions of the poem: social, physical, and sexual. In broader view, *Body Electric* is a unity, a system complete in

its perfection that unites all human bodies in a single oceanic flow. Going with this flow and being part of it is described by Whitman as a sublime state of human existence:

*I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them, or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round
his or her neck for a moment – what is this, then?
I do not ask any more delight – I swim in it, as in a sea.*

Within this universal electric unity, each single body is unique and perfect. Whitman opposes the religious doctrine of the body being the root of evil, following Emerson who talked about the indivisibility of spiritual and physical powers of a human and of the human spirit put into the body “as fire put into a pan, to be carried about” [Emerson 1983: 447]. The corruption of *own live bodies* and the attempt to conceal oneself, by Whitman, equals the Biblical sin of Adam and Eve which impelled them to conceal their nakedness. Confronted by those who found his poetry obscene and religiously offensive, Whitman came up with a retort: “Will the world ever get over its own indecencies and stop attributing them to God?” [Schmidgall 2001: 173]

A human body is an electrical substance, a unity of its elements joined in a single electric field. It is a phenomenon that existed millions of years, and at the same time every single manifestation of it is unique and matchless. “The same old blood” runs in the veins of every human, but in the every instance the human body is sacred – *No matter who it is, it is sacred*. This perfection of a human body makes Whitman resort to its extensive descriptions and enumerations. As every human is precious in the oceanic universe of human bodies, every part of the body is precious in the oceanic universe of a single body. Calling a human body *a wonder*, Whitman takes infinite delight in listing every small feature of the bodily structure, which results in a particular syntactic arrangement of the poem. This grammatical strategy, which evoked an outcry of criticism, is but another way to describe a human body as a marvel. The listing of body parts in the final section of the poem is grammatically arranged as one sentence: one hundred and thirty-three parts and functions enumerated in thirty lines are equally unique and linked to each other in one miraculous system.

This physical perfection of a human is an inspiration for a sexual desire. The human body, as Huck Gutman acutely observes, accounts for the erotic attraction and legitimizes the sexual hungers “because the body is so electric, so filled with a vital energy that attracts and a galvanic current that flows” [Gutman 1998]. The physical act of love in section five of the poem is described by Whitman as the essence of human existence and a cause of a new birth – that of a child and that of a man whose birth is completed by a physical union with a woman. This philosophy and stylistic features have been a challenge for translators throughout the twentieth century.

The first translation of *I Sing the Body Electric* into these Slavic languages was that into Russian produced by Konstantin Balmont (1867-1942) [Uitmen 1911: 28-38]. Balmont was an outstanding poet, belonging to the school of the Russian Symbolism, which deeply influenced his views both on poetry in general and literary translation in particular. Symbolists were convinced in the primacy of the spiritual over the material, the power of inspiration and intuition. As well, much importance was ascribed to the structure of the literary text. “Any poem is a veil spread over the spikes of several words,” wrote the influential Russian symbolist-poet Alexander Blok. “These words shine like stars. They are the reason the poem exists.” [Blok 1962: 131]. Symbolists treated the language with special reverence and faith in its powers [Careva 2007: 160]. Deep respect for the text was one of the main features of Balmont’s translations: in his preface to the first edition of his translations of Whitman’s poetry he pointed out that he had tried to be as precise as possible and resorted to paraphrasing only where he could not avoid it [Uitmen 1911: 7].

At the same time not everyone has seen Balmont’s translation as being faithful to the original. Already in the early 1920s Balmont was severely criticized by the Russian critic Ivan Aksyonov (1884 – 1935) for discrediting the “revolutionary significance” of Whitman’s poetry by introducing the lines in praise of the human body. This “dirty verses”, in Aksyonov’s view, could not have been written by Whitman himself [Leighton 1982]. Balmont’s approach was severely criticized by his contemporary and rival Korney Chukovsky (1882- 1969) for “flowery rhetoric” and “external prettiness” and for conveying a false image of Whitman’s aesthetics and philosophy, making of him a “poet of the self” [Leighton 1982]. It was Korney Chukovsky who later became the most recognized translator of Whitman in Russia, though the poem *I Sing the Body Electric* is better known to the Russian readers in the translation of Mikhail Zenkevich (1886 – 1973) [Uitmen 1970: 105-109].

An active poet in the pre-revolutionary Russia, Zenkevich was mainly engaged in translation under communism, focusing on translations from the English language. The literary approach of that period rooted from the philosophy of Social Realism which was first introduced in the 1920s and was finally announced as the guideline for literary writing in 1932. Of all existing literary methods, Social Realism was one of the very few that were presented to the public as a ready-made prescription [Litovskaja 2008: 14]. Art was seen as a special weapon of class struggle which required the realism of a special type. This special realism was to be founded on “a special kind of truth” [Litovskaja 2008: 14] and “social optimism” [Litovskaja 2008: 15]. Moreover, in 1955, the Soviet translator and literary critic Ivan Kashkin (1899 – 1963) introduced the concept of *realistic translation* which required the translators to “read the original through the eyes of their contemporaries in the light of their socialist and revolutionary view of the world” [Kashkin 1955: 138]. This militant optimism expected the poetry to be “chaste” and its form and content to be free from imperfection. Tied by the call for literary chastity, Zenkevich, who used to be an akmeist and wrote some love and erotic poetry before the Soviet time, mitigated in his translation sexual, gender and body issues, incompatible with the dominant idea

of “social optimism”. He preserved most of the formal features of the original, but had to emphasize the social and revolutionary aspects of Whitman’s poetry.

The same philosophy affected the translation of the poem into Bulgarian made by the literary critic, writer and translator Tsvetan Stoyanov (1930 – 1971) in 1965[Uitman 1965: 38-45]. In those days, the Bulgarian literature was much under the influence of the Soviet propaganda, but Stoyanov was one of the intellectuals who was promoting the Western literature, welcoming new styles and literary expressions. Stoyanov compiled the stylistic ideology, as well as with the chastity requirements, which, like in the USSR, called for mitigation of sexuality in text. However, he remained faithful in rendering Whitman’s imagery, metaphors and intonations.

The fall of communist regime was followed by immediate changes in literary views and in the advent of the era of literary experiments in the two countries. The newly gained freedom of speech was a cause for new approaches to translation, which advocated freedom of expression and text interpretation. It was in 1996 when Bulgarian poet and translator Vladimir Svintila (1926 – 1998) came up with a new translation of *I Sing the Body Electric* [Uitman 1996: 20-27]. The new political conditions allowed the translator to handle the free verse more easily and preserve the explicit sexuality of the original. At the same time, it is obvious that Svintila desired to make his translation different from what had been done before him and to avoid being similar to Stoyanov. This strategy can be seen in his intentional choice of vocabulary, turns of phrase, verb tenses, even when he had every possibility to use the same words, syntax and tenses.

One of the challenging aspects of the original is its poetical and stylistic organisation. The poem consists of long sentences spread over several lines without enjambments. It is mainly written in free verse, which presupposes no regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, although some lines offer a regular meter (for example, the first line in the poem follows a iambic pattern). The rhythmicity of the poem is often provided by the use of parallel constructions. Whitmanian parallelisms are frequently based on repetitions of the same textual elements or syntactical structure, as we see in part four where the first four lines start with infinitives and finish (misaligned by one verse) with the predicate *is enough*:

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,

To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,

To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,

To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment <...>

This formal aspect of Whitman’s poetry is generally taken into account in the translations. However, the main challenge for the translators is related to the double aspect of Whitman’s poem. On the one hand, *I Sing the Body Electric* offers a rough and prosaic style, conveying the impression of a “bad” writing; on the other hand, it includes solemn intonations and “epic notes”.

The so-called roughness comes from the regular syntax, repetitions, and the abundant use of pronouns, which make the poem sound like an unrehearsed speech.

On the other hand, the solemnity of the tone is created by the use of archaic and biblical lexicon (*engirth*), exclamations (*o my Body*), and inversed syntax [Polonsky 1997: 410]. This double aspect of Whitman's style became one of the main difficulties for the Communist period translators who were strongly encouraged to apply more conventional ways, fluent syntax, poeticised expression, less colloquial intonations in rendering the foreign originals.

Thus, the four translators applied different strategies to the whitmanian style. The direct word order dominates in the syntax of the poem; however, inversions are regularly used – sometimes accompanied by other expressive means and stylistic devices. For example, the beginning of part 3 is based on a repetition and the use of an inverted order, which creates the effect of an epic recital while the content links the poem to the Book of Genesis:

*I know a man, a common farmer – the father of five sons;
And in them the fathers of sons – and in them the fathers of sons.*

In these lines, *in them* is a crucial point to understand Whitman's recurring image of eternity and never ending ancestry that links every human with the moment of Creation. The original does not focus on the linearity of succession of fathers and sons, but of their unity: each individual 'contains' all the constellations of ancestors. This is how we understand the use of *in them* instead of *they were*. Stylistically, the image is enhanced by the use of the inverted word order and the elliptical (missing verb) expression. However simple the lines might seem, the translators demonstrated amazing versatility when rendering the passage:

B: *Я знал человека, простого фермера, отца пяти сыновей,
И в них – отцов сыновей, и в них – отцов сыновей.*

Z: *Я знал одного фермера, отца пятерых сыновей,
Они были отцы сыновей – и те тоже отцы сыновей.*

St: *Познавах един човек, обикновен фермер, баща на петима сина,
И те бащи на синове, и синове им – бащи на синове.*

Sv: *Познавах едного, бе прост фермер, пет сина имаше
И в тях бащи на синове, и в тях – бащи на синове.*

Balmont and Svintila follow the structure of the second verse and preserve *in them* alongside with the verb ellipsis. As opposed to that, the communist period translators rationalise the syntax. Zenkevich chooses a normal order of words and adds a verb (*They were fathers and sons*), while Stoyanov gather the verb ellipsis but does the syntax more fluent (*And they fathers of sons and their sons – fathers of sons*), neutralising the biblical intonation.

The attempt to avoid the unusual syntax and elliptical expression is striking in both translations of the Soviet period. The expression *in them* was paraphrased, thus the direction of ancestry was reverted: whereas in the original the contemporary human is seen as the result of the Creation, the heir of *the same old blood*, Zenkevich and Stoyanov place the contemporary human at the beginning of the Creation (*they were fathers of sons, and their sons – fathers of sons*).

Analysing the four translations, we notice that both Zenkevich and Stoyanov resort to syntax rationalization, therefore achieving textual predictability. This strategy is applied wherever they have to deal with the ‘bad’ writing, even if it is a poetic trait of the original.

We can compare the translations of an example from the third part, which describes a man, using several sequences connected by the preposition “of”:

*This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person;
The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, and the
Immeasurable meaning of his black eyes – the richness and breadth of his
manners...*

The expressivity here comes from the ‘heavy’ use of the preposition “of” and the accumulation of nominal structures which describe the man. Balmont follows this expression by using several genitive structures:

*Это был человек удивительной силы, спокойствия, красоты всей
наружности,
Форма его головы, бледно-жёлтый и белый цвет бороды и волос,
бездонность значения в выражении чёрных глаз, широта и свобода
движений, манер...*

Zenkevich, in contrast, rationalises by using mainly the more neutral nominative structures:

*Он был удивительно силен, спокоен, прекрасен,
Его голова, жёлто-белые волосы, борода, глубокий взгляд его
Тёмных глаз, широта и щедрость его обращенья...*

We notice the same rationalisation strategy in Stoyanov’s translation:

*Тоя човек имаше удивителна сила, спокойствие и хубост,
главата му, със бледожълтите и белите коси, брадата, безбройните
израз на черните очи, богатството и размаха в държанието...*

Svintila’s translation follows the original structures more faithfully and respects the poetical expressivity:

*Този мъж бе със прекрасна сила, вътрешен покой, с красива външност,
а формата на черепа му, бледорусия и бял оттенък на косите и брадата му,
неизмеримото значение на тъмния му поглед, богатството и замаха на
неговия жест...*

Repetitions are another stylistic feature of this poem. Regular repetitions in Whitman’s text are the basis of the ample use of alliteration, which takes part in the construction of the poetic rhythm – a feature particularly valuable for a free verse text. Repetitions of grammatical constructions create the effect of unprepared colloquial speech, a distinguishing feature of Whitman’s poetry. The two translators often neglect the whitmanian repetition, depriving the translation of the author’s signature stylistic device. For instance, in part 3, Whitman repeats the word *love* five times within two succeeding lines:

*They and his daughters loved him – all who saw him loved him;
They did not love him by allowance – they loved him with personal love.*

Balmont eagerly follows the iterative pattern and even makes it sound like an incantation:

*Они и дочери любили его, все, кто видел его, любили его,
не из-за доброй его славы любили его, а личной любили любовью.*

Zenkevich, on the contrary, favours fluency: he neutralizes the tone of the poem by reducing the number of repetitions:

*Сыновья и дочери любили его – каждый, кто знал, любил его;
Любили не из почтения, а искренне – каждый по-своему.*

The quantitative reduction of repetitions and alliterations in Zenkevich's translation leads to the destruction of the epic tone of the poem. Stoyanov adopts the same strategy: he cuts the number of repetitions by half and turns the short complex sentence into an expanded one, which destroys the epic melodiousness of the poem:

*Обичаха го и те, и дъщерите му, и всички, които го бяха виждали,
обичаха го не от друго, обичаха го заради него.*

Svintila demonstrates a different approach to the translation of these lines. Instead of using the repetition, he alternates two synonyms of the verb *to love* – *обикна* and *любя* – which in Bulgarian denote different registers, *любя* being more archaic and literary verb. This increases the emotional charge of the text and impairs the strategy of Whitman who tends to repeat the same words in most contexts:

*Дъщерите му го любеха, всички, дете го познаваха, го любеха.
Него обикваха по принуждение, обикваха го ей така.*

Listings of words and sequences are another common poetic device of Whitman. They add to the density of the text, both visually and rhythmically. Whitman commonly lists gerunds and verbal nouns thus describing states and occupations and focusing the reader's attention on the narration rather than action. At the end of part two, he introduces the image of firemen whose action is described by verbal nouns: *The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert*. Here the use of verbal nouns instead of verbs gives the next an almost photographic quality. Balmont follows the expressivity of this pattern and preserves the verbal nouns and the narrative perspective: *Возвращенье с пожара неторопливое, замедленье, когда вдруг опять призывает их колокол, внимательность насторожившихся*. Zenkevich handles this part of the poem differently, rationalizing the syntax: *Неспешное возвращенье с пожара, потом передышка и снова сигнал тревоги, все слушают напряжённо*. One can see that the translator here does not follow the listing of the original. He also introduces the adverbs *потом* (*then*) and *снова* (*again*), and by doing so he coordinates the order of actions making the listing impossible. Zenkevich destroys the narrative perspective by translating the *listening on the alert* with a verbal paraphrase *all are listening intensely*. Similar strategy is employed by Stoyanov who substitutes two verbal nouns by verbs and shifts the narrative perspective into action perspective: *Завръщането след пожара и почивка таза миг, камбаната пак бие, ослушват се напрегнато*. It is Svintila's translation which looks the closest to the original – he sticks to the author's grammar, as well as wording, and renders the

narrative perspective: *И бавното завръщане подир пожара, отново паузата, в която пак камбаната нечакано звъни, и вслушването във тревожния сигнал.*

Elliptical sentences are another central poetic device of Whitman's poetry. Usually, the missing element is a verb which leaves the description in suspense. Here we quote a sentence from the fifth part which lacks a finite verb:

*Bridegroom night of love, working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn;
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.*

To translate this phrase, Balmont chooses active participles without any verbs:

*Новобрачната нощ на любовта, верно и нежно входящата в зрята
распростёрта, волнообразно входящата в деня, хотящия и отдаващия,
Потеряващата в този нежном разрыве обявяващия сладко-телесния ден.*

Zenkevich neutralises the elliptic expression of the phrase: he introduces a verb and reduces the quantity of participles:

*Новобрачната нощ на любовта преминава надёжно и нежно в свет
распростёрта,*

Переливаща се в желанния, покорен ден,

Потеряваща се в объятията сладостной плоти дневной

Stoyanov's translation is even more neutral, as he uses only verbs:

*брачната нощ на любовта, тя сигурно и нежно преминава в проснатото
утро,*

накъдря се, прелива във желания, отдаден ден,

изгубва се във отвора на сладкия и ласкав ден.

In contrast to the original, the translation shifts toward a poetic and fluent expression. It roots the verses into the conventional way of writing during this period.

Svintila's translation follows the elliptic character of the phrase and faithfully conveys the double aspect of Whitman's poetry. On the one hand, Svintila transmits the impression of 'bad' writing by the unusual, in Bulgarian, accumulation of active participles; on the other hand, he conveys to the verses a poetic dimension, using an archaic or fairy-tale lexicon (*venchalna* [nuptial], *nichkom* [beneath]):

*венчална нощ на любовта, уверено и тайно действаща пред ничком
падалото утро,*

люлееща се в искация и отстъпващия ден,

изгубена в объятията на прегръщащия ден със меката му плът.

The variety of the decisions made by the four translators of *I Sing the Body Electric* was a consequence of the changing *translation horizon* [Berman 1995: 79] in the two Slavic countries in the twentieth century. In all times, the translators recognized Walt Whitman as an innovator and associated his poetry with stylistic experimenting and candid imagery, but each historic epoch provided its own interpretation of both the poem and the concept of innovation itself.

Indeed, we find in Balmont's *Body Electric* an emphasis on the archaic vocabulary, which is less present in the original, but we also find an effort to preserve the challenging Whitman's free verse. We can also see that Balmont was determined

to convey the prosaic qualities of Whitman's expression. Thus, despite the mistakes and the strong influence of symbolist poetics, Balmont's *Body Electric* is syntactically very close to the original.

We can find a similar respect toward the formal features of the original in the translation of Svintila. The translator put an emphasis on the use of an archaic vocabulary which conveys to the translation some biblical and poetic intonations characteristic for the original. Svintila handles the free verse, respects the repetitions, does not 'correct' the unusual syntax, and elliptic expressions.

Thus we discover some similar translation strategies of the communist period translators applied to rendering the formal aspect of the text. These strategies were not restricted to entire or partial text cuts, or replacement of parts of a translated text. Our analysis shows that Zenkevich and Stoyanov's translations demonstrate compliance with the Socialist realism requirements and are adjusted in accordance with the mid-20 century literary canons. This involved syntactic modifications such as eliminations of repetitions, changes in the word order, and the substitutions of grammatical stylistic devices originally employed by Whitman for lexical effects. It is important to see which of these four translations are still canonical in the new literary context of the two countries. It remains to be seen whether the new cultural contexts in Russia and Bulgaria would initiate new projects of translating *I Sing the Body Electric*.

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