

Belacqua and the “I” in the Novellas – the Narration of Two Worlds in the Prose of Samuel Beckett

Lívia Bueloni Gonçalves

Abstract: *Based on the analysis of excerpts from Samuel Beckett’s first book of short stories, More Pricks than Kicks (1934), this article investigates to what extent the narrator in this book demonstrates certain characteristics that appear in subsequent prose by Beckett, mainly as regards to interventions in the stories that are told.*

To discuss this subject, excerpts will also be used from “Premier Amour” (1970), which, together with “L’Expulsé”, “Le Calmant” and “La Fin” (1955), make up the first fictional texts written by Beckett in French.

The importance of comparing such stories to those from More Pricks than Kicks comes from the fact that they present the typical Beckettian first-person narrator, well-known for his peculiar story-telling style, replete with impasses and questions about the narrated story. Comparison between the narrative styles in these texts also allows us to investigate the characteristics of two distinct and unique moments in Samuel Beckett’s prose.

Belacqua, the first Beckettian protagonist

More Pricks than Kicks, the first book of short stories written by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), was published in 1934. It contains ten stories about a young artist, Belacqua Shuah, and its central line concerns the strolls of the main character Belacqua through the streets of Dublin and his relationships with different women.

The name Belacqua is an allusion to the character by the same name from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In Dante’s work, Belacqua is punished for his indolence, and he appears in *Canto IV* of the “Purgatory”, condemned to wait the same period he had lived in sloth before starting to complete his penance. Yet, in *More Pricks than Kicks*, the protagonist fights off his sloth by exercising the option to keep in constant motion, as the narrator explains in the third story of the book, “Ding-dong”:

My sometime friend Belacqua enlivened the last phase of his solipsism, before he toed the line and began to relish the world, with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place. [...] Being by nature however sinfully indolent, bogged in indolence, asking nothing better than to stay put at the good pleasure of what he called The Furies, he was at times tempted to wonder whether the remedy were not rather more disagreeable than the complaint. (Beckett 1972, 36-7)

Beckett was himself a young artist at the time he wrote this book, and it has been noted that Belacqua Shuah's initials are the same as the author's, but backwards, which suggests he made a joke when creating his first protagonist.² It is also important to emphasise that Belacqua first appeared in a previous novel by Beckett – *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992), one he had rejected and which was only posthumously published. The stories in *More Pricks than Kicks* were extracted from this novel. The main intention of both the novel and the book of short stories might be to parody conventional fiction and the conventional hero, while at the same time painting a picture of a young artist, and a bourgeois intellectual such as himself (Kroll 14).

The first story in the book, "Dante and the Lobster", shows Belacqua trying to understand an excerpt from the *Divine Comedy*. After facing many difficulties, he decides to abandon Dante and concentrate on three tasks: preparing his lunch, buying a lobster for his aunt and going to his Italian lesson.

A sacred lunch

Lunch, to come off at all, was a very nice affair. If his lunch was to be enjoyable, and it could be very enjoyable indeed, he must be left in absolute tranquillity to prepare it. But if he were disturbed now, if some brisk tattler were to come bouncing in now big with a big idea or a petition, he might just as well not eat at all, for the food would turn to bitterness on his palate, or, worse again, taste of nothing. He must be left strictly alone; he must have complete quiet and privacy to prepare the food for his lunch.

The first thing to do was to lock the door. Now nobody could come at him. [...] Then he lit the gas-ring and unhooked the square flat toaster, asbestos grill, from its nail and set it precisely on the flame. He found he had to lower the flame. Toast must not on any account be done too rapidly. For bread to be toasted as it ought, through and through, it must be done on a mild steady flame. Otherwise you only charred the outside and left the pith as sodden as before. If there was one thing he abominated more than another it was to feel his teeth meet in a bathos of pith and dough. And it was so easy to do the things properly. So, he thought, having regulated the flow and adjusted the grill, by the time I have the bread cut that will be just right (Beckett 1972, 10-1).

In this quotation, we have the narrator's comments on Belacqua's preparation of his lunch; it is the start of a long description of this event. Most of this short story is composed of narrative showing the reader in detail how the meal was prepared.

The first things that call our attention, considering the directions that Beckett's subsequent prose will take, are the richness of detail and the specificity of the descriptions, characteristics that will tend to disappear as soon he starts to adopt French as his literary language, between 1945 and 1950. The stories "Premier Amour", "L'Expulsé", "Le Calmant" and "La Fin" (Beckett's first fictional texts written in this language) mark a rupture in his prose.³ Here we should mention that the typical Beckettian first-person narrator, characterized by his unstable discourse, driven by questions and dead-end arguments, appears in these stories for the very first time; and this emergence is closely associated with the adoption of the French language. After writing these stories, Beckett stopped using the English language, with the explanation that he needed to "impoverish himself, to write without style", a task he considered impossible in his mother tongue.⁴ In this respect, it is important to quote from a letter written in 1937, the so-called "German letter" that Beckett wrote to his friend Axel Kaun. In it, he described the English language as a hurdle, "a veil that one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it" (Fehgenseld 518). It is important to emphasize that, at the time, Beckett was trying to distance himself from the weight of the English literary tradition and, more specifically, from the influence of his countryman James Joyce, a writer he was very close to.

The choice of the French language, however, was not irreversible. Beckett became a bilingual writer. Books like *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* (1938), his first novel, present a linguistic virtuosity that Beckett tried to fight against from the moment he started to write in French, seeking to become more objective and simple in his texts.⁵

In "Dante and the Lobster" Beckett is still distant from this idea of impoverishment that he would later seek, as we can observe in the excerpt above. In addition to the precision of the details, the obsessive importance the protagonist attaches to a simple day-to-day task end up conferring a comic effect on the narrative, so a potential failure in this meal would have consequences similar to those of a major disaster.

Carla Locatelli dedicates a whole chapter of her book, *Unwording the World. Samuel Beckett's prose works after the Nobel Prize*, to an analysis of the comic strategies of Beckett's prose, and she situates *More Pricks than Kicks* in what she calls this writer's parody phase.⁶ In this period of his writings, the comic element is revealed through the parodies of the literary canon. According to Locatelli, the comic effect of Belacqua's adventures is related to the identification of parodies, for example, the *Divine Comedy* and the *Bildungsroman*. Analyzing another excerpt of "Dante and the Lobster", also related to the protagonist's lunch, she emphasizes the narrator's unjustified insistence on narrating the minute details of the preparation of the lunch, considering the insignificance of such actions. However, the implicit criticism in the excess of description that is part of many works connected to the tradition of formal realism, makes the passage comical.⁷

We could add here that the protagonist's effort to perform his task, as well as his decision to postpone the resolution of the Dante-esque conundrum, reinforce the comic aspect of the story. The title itself bears this characteristic, provoking a certain shock by approximating two different universes: the high universe of Dante and the universe of the lobster, which represents Belacqua's day-to-day life. The purchase of the shellfish is his second task of the day. As Robert Cochran (6) well observes, unlike the character's attempt to understand Dante, he is extremely successful at preparing lunch.

Another interesting aspect of this excerpt is the narrator's position towards the protagonist. In a passage already mentioned in the third story of the book – "Ding-Dong" – the narrator describes himself as an old friend of Belacqua. This is exactly the impression that we get from the comments, often ironical, that he makes throughout the book.⁸ In a narrative style that is very distant from that employed in Beckett's stories in French, the narrator here accompanies Belacqua while gradually revealing his own personality in each story of the book. This omniscient narrator observes and comments on the protagonist's attitudes.⁹ The narration of *More Pricks than Kicks* is not subject to the uncertainties and gaps that start to appear in the French writings. The interruptions in the narrative are more to ironise Belacqua and make brief comments on the story, as we shall see below.

At this point in "Dante and the Lobster", the narrator emphasises the protagonist's need to isolate himself and not be disturbed while preparing his meal – "But if he were disturbed now... He must be left strictly alone, he must have complete quiet and privacy to prepare the food for this lunch". This predilection for isolation and disconnection from the world is already present here and will remain as a typical trait of the Beckettian protagonist from this point on.

In this and other short stories in *More Pricks than Kicks*, the narrator still behaves as the "master" of the stories he intends to tell; he knows everything about his protagonist and keeps his distance from the impotence and the ignorance of the anonymous first-person narrator who appears in the novellas. The use of the omniscient narration allows the narrator to describe the scenes and penetrate Belacqua's thoughts.

The clarity and richness of detail present here start to fade with the appearance of the first-person narrator, who demonstrates he is no longer in full command of his own narrative. The change in the author's style is very significant from the novellas on. Thus, the precise description of preparing toast in the quoted text gives way to passages such as this one in "First Love", in which the narrator becomes irritated when trying to describe the sky:

But some weeks later, even more dead than alive than usual, I returned to the bench, for the fourth or fifth time since I had abandoned it, at roughly the same hour, I mean roughly the same sky, no, I don't mean that either, for it's always the same sky and never the same sky, what words are there for that, none I know, period. (Beckett 1995. 37-8)

It is important to mention that the ability to describe certain settings precisely does not abruptly disappear in the subsequent stories, but becomes subject to this narrative instability which, by questioning the very story being told, leaves the reader on uncertain ground.

In *More Pricks than Kicks*, the situation is quite different. The narrator is still capable of creating a very real and precise atmosphere in the settings he describes, as we can observe in the second story in his book entitled “Fingal”.

Strolling around Dublin

In “Fingal”, we are introduced to the protagonist’s first girlfriend, Winnie. Both take a walk around North Dublin, and each part of the landscape is minutely described, as we can observe at the beginning of the story:

They turned east off the road from Dublin to Malahide short of the Castle woods and soon it came into view, not much more than a burrow, the ruin of a mill on the top, choked lairs of furze and brambles passim on its gentle slopes. It was a landmark for miles around on account of the high ruin. The Hill of the Wolves [...] They considered Fingal for a time together in silence. Its coast eaten away with creeks and marshes, tesserae of small fields, patches of woods springing up like a weed, the line of hills too low to close the view. (Beckett 1995. 23-4)

In this story, the couple decides to take a walk to an asylum, the “Portrane Lunatic Asylum”, and all of the details of their journey are described by the narrator. If we compare the type of description used here and the type of description used in the novellas, we will have a good sample of the changes that the first-person narrative underwent in Beckett’s prose.

In “First Love”, for example, the description of the bench where the protagonist first met Lulu and the scene of numerous meetings between the two starts with numerous doubts about its location:

I met her on a bench, on the bank of the canal, one of the canals, for our town boasts two, though I never knew which one was which. It was a well situated bench, backed by a mound of solid earth and garbage, so that my rear was covered. My flanks too, partially, thanks to a pair of venerable trees, more than venerable, dead, at either end of the bench. It was no doubt these trees one fine day, arripple with all their foliage, that had sown the idea of a bench, in someone’s fancy. To the fore, a few yards away, flowed the canal, if canals flow, don’t ask me, so that from that quarter too the risk of surprise was small. And yet she surprised me. (Beckett 1995. 30)

Although we can visualize the bench between the two big trees, the narrator is not as certain as he is in “Fingal” when it comes to describing the location. He admits he cannot tell the difference between the two canals that flow through the city and once more emphasizes the fact he knows nothing – “don’t ask me”. This expression of impotence is one of the great distinctions between the two narratives which, through their descriptions, are good examples of the changes that occurred in Beckett’s prose – the first narrative, which provides a very detailed picture of the landscapes visited by Belacqua and Winnie; and the second narrative, which implies the impossibility of a precise description, due to the narrator’s uncertainties.

It is important to stress, however, that the third-person narrative used in *More Pricks than Kicks*, though close to the classical moulds that the author will fight against later on, already has embedded in it Beckett’s criticism of this kind of literature, as Locatelli observes. Beckett uses elements of this literary tradition to parody it, and for this very reason he uses an omniscient third-person narrator that is closer to the impassibility that characterizes the narrators in a great number of nineteenth-century novels. In the same way that we observe the particularities of Belacqua’s lunch, we can see the descriptions of landscapes in “Fingal” as examples of this criticism. When the author adopts first-person narrative, he starts to expose, through this new narrative structure, a more fragile world, since the main characteristic of the protagonist he chooses is to fill his narrative with doubt and uncertainty. Beckett’s choice of this narrative style is crucial in exposing the uncertain world he intends to depict from this moment on.

During the couple’s walk, another feature of the protagonist can be identified as an indication of his preference for isolation. In the final part of the story, he leaves Winnie with a friend, steals a bicycle and rides away, with total disregard for the date he had made with both of them.¹⁰ Belacqua ends up alone, drinking in a bar.

The relationships that the protagonist of these stories establishes with other people are characterized by a sort of irritation and repulsion of human contact. His “friendship” with the coachman in “The expelled” and with the man who offers him shelter in “The end” cause him more disdain for the two characters than gratitude for their offer of help. In the case of “First Love”, he prefers to go back to living on the street than living with Lulu.

In *More Pricks than Kicks*, his longing for isolation is not as radical as it is in subsequent texts, although the tendency is there. Belacqua still relates to his friends, goes to parties, and gets married three times, merely to mention a few examples.

The protagonist’s attempt to adapt to the world exists at the same time that the narrative used is still suitable to a more traditional, organic, representational and mimetic mould, even if only to parody it.¹¹ As this narrative form starts to be put in question more radically (and this is due to the adoption of the first-person narrator), the protagonist’s attitude also becomes more radical. From the novellas on, he appears completely enclosed in his world and has all sorts of difficulties communicating with others. He feels he is no longer capable of expressing himself or communicating. His escape on a bicycle, besides

evoking a typically Beckettian image, is Belacqua's escape from social commitments, represented by his girlfriend and his friend.

First narrative interventions

"Dante and the Lobster" has a very well-defined beginning, development and closing. The other stories in the book are no different in this regard. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe some of the narrator's comments and interventions that arise outside the context of the story and that send us back to the very way these stories are told – a ploy he will use frequently from the *nouvelles* on.

At the moment Belacqua arrives at his aunt's house with the lobster, for example, the narrator suddenly decides to say that it is wintertime, yet introduces doubts about this very fact: "Belacqua drew near to the house of his aunt. Let us call it Winter, that dusk may fall now and a moon rise" (Beckett 1972. 20). This observation strikes our attention because, as we could see in the excerpt from "First Love" above, one of the characteristics of the novellas' narrator is exactly to demonstrate this frailty of narration, to emphasise that whoever is narrating does not have absolute command over the material narrated. We might say that the narrator of *More Pricks than Kicks*, however shyly, is already revealing a strategy that was to be characteristic of later Beckettian prose. The story – intermingled with interruptions – can already be seen, although this intrusiveness is very different in subsequent texts.

A second example can be seen right at the beginning of the fifth story, "Love and Lethe", when Ruby Tough is waiting for Belacqua while she talks and drinks coffee with her mother. We have numerous narrative interventions made to "help" us read the story:

'And the rosiner' said Mrs Tough, 'will you have that in the lav too?'
Reader, a rosiner is a drop of the hard.
Ruby rose and took a gulp of the coffee to make room.
'I'll have a gloria' she said.
Reader, a gloria is coffee laced with brandy. (Beckett 1972. 89).

Such comments, which work here as a form of complicity with the reader, are very frequent in the book. The interventions, in addition to the irony with which the narrator tells Belacqua's stories, also make it clear that we are in the presence of fiction. This is a lighter and more graceful form of interruption, very distinct from the interventions made by the first person-narrator in the novellas. The latter questions the story he is telling to a much greater extent, often holding it in contempt, and is much more anguished about his narrative.

More Pricks than Kicks belongs to a very different phase from that inaugurated by the novellas. The moments when the narrator of the stories positions himself on the "outside" in order to speak ironically about Belacqua or to make comments about what

he is narrating are still far away from the rupture of the narrator of the French texts. These are interventions of another kind – although, in these 1934 stories, we already have a glimpse of a characteristic that is closer to the novellas that were to be written more than ten years afterwards.

In the segmentation proposed by Locatelli, the novellas are part of the second phase of Beckett's comic development – marking a transition between the parodic game ascribed to the books *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* and the beginning of the comical production centred on the metanarrative language. Locatelli (88) points out the erosion of the essential aspects of traditional narratives in this phase, such as narrative authority, authorship and textual coherence. The utilisation of the first-person narrator is exactly what allows this change, since he is responsible for the questions that arise around “telling a story”, revealing to the reader the “presence of literature” through all the metalinguistic interruptions.

Thinking not only of “Dante and the Lobster”, but also of the other stories in the book, we might say that *More Pricks than Kicks* is part of a period in Beckettian prose that is still attached to more traditional narration – something that Beckett started to fight in his later fiction – the adoption of the French language being the trigger of this change. The collected stories work as Belacqua's biography and could even be read as a novel, since we follow a large period of the protagonist's life, from the moment he is a student of the Italian language (“Dante and the Lobster”) through the episode of his death and burial (“Draff”), passing through his three marriages.

Concerning “Draff”, the last narrative in the book, it is interesting to note that it is a post-death narrative, as is “The calmative”. The narrator reveals the arrangements for Belacqua's burial, following his death in the previous story, “Yellow”. This penultimate narrative also has similarities with the universe of “The calmative”, since the whole story happens while the protagonist is meditating on his bed, as he waits for the operation that will end up being the cause of his death.

In spite of the similarities that presage the future protagonist, like the taste for wandering and the predilection for isolation, Belacqua is a character who even tries to adapt to the world and its social rules, as we can see in his successive marriages.¹² His image is still distant from the absolutely marginal man that we will see from the novellas on, but some of his characteristics will be always maintained. In “Dante and the Lobster”, the narrator cites Belacqua's walking and the persistent pains in his feet, which foretell of the illnesses and the decrepitude which, little by little, will take hold of his body: “Belacqua had a spavined gait, his feet were in ruins, he suffered with them almost continuously” (Beckett 1972. 15). In this same story, he is described by the owner of a grocery shop as a grotesque sight, another approximation to the future protagonist, a constant victim of ridicule and repulsed by others: “Being a warm-hearted human man he felt sympathy and pity for this queer customer who always looked ill and dejected” (15).

Final considerations

The universe of *More Pricks than Kicks* is closer to *Murphy*, funnier and less sombre, than to Beckett's later prose. The language used in the composition of these stories is quite the opposite of the "impoverished language" that the author was to advocate later on. In *Watt* (1953), his last novel written in English, he is closer to the universe of the novellas, mainly on account of the discussions related to the meaning of language.

It is crucial to emphasise that the novellas were written immediately after the Second World War. The atmosphere we find in these narratives is related to this period. Choosing a narrator who reinforces his ignorance and his own difficulty in narrating, instead of dominating whatever he narrates, mirrors this historical moment. The change from omniscient narration to "impotent" narration depicts a world that has been profoundly shaken by the recent ghost of war. Therefore, the adoption of the first-person narrator is not merely a change in style, but also a form that embodies the spirit of an era. Beckett was to exploit this form of narration still further in his famous trilogy, written soon after the novellas, comprised of *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt* (1951) and *L'innommable* (1953). The most pronounced characteristics of Belacqua continue to be part of the later protagonists, but the way the narrator tells the story undergoes a huge transformation. This change made Beckett well-known as one of the writers responsible for the rupture with the moulds of formal realism in the twentieth-century narrative.

Notes

- * This article is a slightly modified version of one of the chapters of the author's MA dissertation entitled "A narrator in the edge: the pathway of the Beckettian first person from the *nouvelles* to the *Textes pour rien*" (2009). It was revised by Peter James Harris.
- 2 Marie-Claire Pasquier makes this observation in the essay "La rose et le homard: vie et mort de Belacqua Shuah". She also adds that the surname Shuah appears in the Bible (Genesis 38) and has a kinship relation with Onan. (Marie-Claire Pasquier. "La rose et le homard: vie et mort de Belacqua Shuah". In: Rabaté, Jean-Michel (ed.) *Beckett avant Beckett. Essais sur les premières oeuvres*. Paris: Accents/ P.E.N.S., 1984, p.29-30)
- 3 The novellas "L'expulsé", "Le Calmant" and "La Fin" were originally published in French, together with the work *Textes Pour Rien* in *Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1955). The English edition only appeared in 1967 published by Grove Press with the title *Stories and Texts for nothing*. Although written at the same time, the novella "Premier Amour" would only be published in 1970 by Minuit. The English version entitled "First love" was issued in 1973 by Calder and Boyars in a volume that also comprised the other three novellas translated into English. From this moment on, we will use the English version of the novellas. "The expelled" and "The end" were translated from French by Richard Seaver in collaboration with Beckett himself, while "The calmative" and "First Love" were translated by Beckett himself.
- 4 To explain why he adopted the French language, Beckett said in an interview in 1956: "To write without style", and in 1968: "To impoverish myself more. This was the real reason". (*Apud* Birkenhauer, Klaus. *Samuel Beckett*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1976, p. 110)

- 5 James Knowlson (357), one of Beckett's biographers, comments on the writer's need to establish a distance from Joyce's influence.
- 6 Locatelli points out three phases in the evolution of comicality in Beckett's prose. The first one is characterized by the utilisation of elements from the literary tradition with the function of criticising and transposing this structure. This would be an intertextual phase. *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* would be two examples from this period. The writer refers to this canon to parody it. It is the case of the utilization of Dante in the first story in this collection. The second phase, so-called "metanarrative", was concentrated on the parody of the literary genres used. This phase, now intratextual, made it clear that we are now in the presence of literature due to the narrative interruptions of a metalinguistic character. Locatelli (1990) quotes, as examples, the works of the 40s and 50s. The last phase, defined as "essentially discursive" was the most problematic, and the humour occurred at the discourse level. This phase characterised Beckett's final prose, in which the language system itself is kept in check.
- 7 I refer to formal realism in the moulds described by Ian Watt and defined as "a full and authentic report of human experience" [...] "under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their action, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" (Watt 32).
- 8 At the beginning of "Ding Dong", for example, the narrator says that he gave up on Belacqua because he was not a serious person: "He was an impossible person in the end. I gave him up in the end because he was not serious" (Beckett 1972, 38)
- 9 This is based on Norman Friedman's narrator typology. One of his categories is "editorial omniscience", characterized by the author's comments and direct interferences in his text. The prefaces of *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding, would be examples of this category. We shall see, further on, that the narrator of *More Pricks than Kicks* makes some ironical comments and little intrusions in the story as he is telling it. We can relate him to this category because, although what happens here is not a direct interference by the author, as in the examples quoted by Friedman, the brief interruptions and the characteristics of the ironical narration style of this book are closer to "editorial omniscience" than to "neutral omniscience", the second type described in the text.
- 10 During their journey, they meet Dr. Sholto, a friend of Winnie's and a doctor at the Portrane Lunatic Asylum. The three of them agree to meet in an hour at the asylum door, but Belacqua wants to take a different route and, for this reason, he leaves alone. When he sees a bicycle and does not see its owner around, he steals it and leaves at full speed.
- 11 The "organic" category is being used in the sense defended by Peter Bürger in *Teoria da Vanguarda*. Bürger distinguishes the organic and the non-organic works, the latter being typical of the vanguard. Whereas the former are characterised by unity and their presumption of reproducing reality through a closer approach to Nature, the latter present a contradictory unity, in which there is no longer a possibility of apprehending sense from the study of the relationship between the whole and its parts, since the elements used have become autonomous. Thus, the main feature of these works would be fragmentation. (Bürger, Peter. *Teoria da vanguarda*. Trad. José Pedro Antunes. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2008.)
- 12 When we think about Belacqua's attempts to adapt, it is possible to relate his trajectory to that of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) by James Joyce. In this book, the protagonist raises intense questions about the directions he can take in his life. Religion, love, artistic endowment and education are themes that torment Dedalus in his search for an authentic pathway consistent with his desire to be a writer. The two books show the protagonists dealing with the conflict between following a completely individual and free pathway and adapting to the already established Irish lifestyle. Despite the thematic similarity and the continuously emphasised relationship between Joyce and Beckett, it is important to note that, in *More Pricks than Kicks*, Belacqua's trajectory is treated comically and, as we have

already observed, in a parody of classical narratives, including the *Bildungsroman*, the genre to which *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* belongs.

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