

TED HUGHES AND R. S. THOMAS – ADVOCATES OF ECOTHEOLOGY?**Ioana Baci, PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: The essay is an exploration of the eco-sensitive mythologies advanced by Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas, focusing on the Biblical narratives they engage with, the relationship between nature and andro- and anthropo- centricity in their proposed mythological framework. Ecotheology and ecocritique propose revisionist readings of modern civilization that oscillate between the rejection of anthropocentricity and the inevitable return to an all too human perspective. Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas, while voicing anti-modern stances and bemoaning the usurpation of spirituality by technology, are also 'makers of poetry', thus inherently occupying, God-like, a superior plane in their relationship with nature. The crux for both is to be able to forge viable alternative spiritual models without succumbing to the rationalizing arrogance of Fallen Man. By denouncing, in *Crow*, the debased Creation of industrialized modernity, Hughes expresses a primordial yearning, almost a death-wish, for the return to paradisiacal Nature. The raw, instinctual predators of the volumes preceding *Crow* (*The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal*, *Recklings*, *Wodwo*) are no longer a spiritual refuge for the seeker of authenticity. In *Crow*, the most pessimistic of Hughes's volumes of poetry, nature is contaminated beyond repair: it has become post-nature, a wasteland witnessing the predictable agony of fallen man and fallen nature. For R.S. Thomas, though, nature preserves its redemptive quality despite its quintessential inscrutability: like God himself, nature is enigmatic and compelling for reasons that exceed man's capacity of understanding, a thing the poet-priest occasionally struggles to accept.*

Keywords: Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas, technology, ecotheology, ecocriticism

This essay is an exploration of the eco-sensitive mythologies advanced by Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas, focusing on the Biblical narratives they engage with, the relationship between nature and andro- and anthropo- centricity in their proposed mythological framework. Genesis is a crucial chapter for any mythology, but particularly relevant in the terms of ecotheology – not only are all living things created, but they are assigned roles and ranks that give preference to human. The original sources of what has been dubbed and exposed as 'Christian anthropocentrism and misogyny'¹ are Genesis 1.26² but especially 3.16-19, the verses describing God's punishment for Man's transgression.³ Besides death, man and woman are given additional burdens to remind them of their fall: Eve's lot is to give

¹ Alongside the story of the beginnings of creation, that of its destruction – the apocalypse that sees the Earth consumed by fire, is the main ecological concern for retrieval and resistance ecotheological readings alike. In the Second Letter of Peter, 3.10 ('But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.'), some theologians read the destruction of the earth as proof of its inferiority to the human part of creation. However, others argue, this only a step in the renewal of both heaven and earth, the purging of all living things in the wake of the Second Coming of God: Revelation, 21.1: 'And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.'

² 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

³ The most influential piece of ecotheological scholarship, the founder of ecotheology and the deposer of 'Christian anthropocentricity', is Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 article 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis'. He does not argue that Christianity is entirely ecologically unredemptive, though, proposing St. Francis of Assisi as a potential 'patron saint for ecologists.' (p. 5)

birth in pain and obey her spouse⁴, while Adam's sin affects Creation in its entirety: 'cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground (...)'⁵. The enmity between man and nature is established; divinity condemns Adam's progeny to a life of strife, of effortless attempts at placating an adverse, unruly nature.

Thus, to the fore of religious doctrine is the tragedy of Adam and Eve - that of having inflicted upon all of mankind the stigma of original sin. The Western obsession with man as measure of all things, so deeply embedded in the fabric of modernity since Renaissance, has neglected to disseminate a balanced account of the creationist Christian myth. Anthropocentric readings of the Bible fail to notice that there is, indeed, a difference between nature before and after the fall. The exile from Eden coincides with the exile from a state of natural grace for both the human and the non-human, who inhabit their *ekos* as peers, not enemies. Paradise lost represents the loss of home for man and nature alike. After the flood, God decides man's original sin ('evil from his youth') is to blame for his repeated transgressions, and vows never to put an end to Creation again:

(...) the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'⁶

Nature should not be made victim to the transgressions of man; fallen nature, however, is subjected, in its turn, to the dominion of man. Noah's righteousness prevents the complete extinction of humankind, and the aftermath of the flood sees divinity outline, once more, the terms of a pact between man and his maker, a pact that reinstates man's dominion over all living things:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish in the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.'⁷

The second chapter of Genesis contains, however, a description of a significantly dissimilar relationship between Man and Nature from the one pictured above. During the first day of Creation, preceding the forging of all non-human life, God creates man out of dust and breathes life into him. God singles out man for Eden⁸, 'to till it and keep it'⁹, while the rest of Creation follows as his companions and helpers¹⁰. The prophecies that announce the second coming of God and the final salvation of man from mortality - the return to the Edenic condition - make even clearer the paradisiacal state of harmony within Creation: 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lay down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.'¹¹ The Darwinian theory of struggle for the survival of the fittest is dismantled; predator and victim dwell in peaceful togetherness marking the end of history and of violence: 'The suckling child shall put his

⁴ '(...)your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.', Gen. 3.16

⁵ Gen. 3.17-19

⁶ Gen. 8.20-22

⁷ Gen. 9.1-4

⁸ Gen. 2.8-9: 'And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of the good and the evil.'

⁹ Gen. 2.15

¹⁰ Gen. 2.16: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him.'

¹¹ Isaiah 11.6.

hand over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.'¹²

But before a recolonization of the original *ekos* be possible, the human and the non-human are cast into a world of hardship. As Dwight Eddins points out, the animal realm and its struggle for survival are, for Ted Hughes, exponents of the Schopenhauerian will¹³, the vitalistic animus central to all things living. The animal poems from *Lupercal* and *Wodwo* belong to a web of pre-Christian mythology that embraces nature and violence. Hughes is admires the non-human that fights claw and tooth for its survival, oblivious of the rationalizations of the modern mind. *Hawk Roosting* (*Lupercal*) proposes the point of view of the eponymous bird, a perfect specimen of Creation flawlessly designed to kill. There is 'no falsifying dream/Between my hooked head and hooked feet', for the sharp anatomy of beak and talons is the hawk's only possible destiny, redemptive of man's many choices that may prove 'falsifying' instead of liberating. The legitimacy of the predator's 'license to kill' is based on purity of instinct: 'I kill where I please because all is mine./There is no sophistry in my body:/ My manners are the tearing off of heads (...)'¹⁴. In *Pike*¹⁵, the 'submarine of delicacy and horror' is another example of perfect Creation, unchanged, unabated from its purposes since its emergence into existence: 'Killers from the egg; the malevolent aged grin', 'The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs/Not to be changed at this date;/ A life subdued to its instrument'. In *Thistles* (*Wodwo*), the harshness of the Nordic land, nourished by 'the underground stain of a decayed Viking'¹⁶ is transposed into the resilient stalks that renew cyclically, with the stubbornness of warriors: 'Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear, /Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground'. The vegetal counterparts of the fanged hawk and pike, the thistles embody nature's overpowering will, a nature that will even survive man.

For Hughes, the embodiment of this healthy prehistoric vitality is the non-human in the guise of the animal, while for Thomas this vitality dwells in the landscape. A bestiary (otter, thrush, wolf, skylark, fox, hawk) of predators populates Hughes' poetry in praise of the diversity of the natural, but this gives way to the anarchic principle embodied in Crow, the ultimate scavenger of the cityscape. Hughes is careful to choose this particular bird as a symbol of inadequacy and randomness – despite the darkness of its plumage, crow is a debased variant of the raven, without majesty, superficial. His propensity for shiny, glittery things is well-known. The pessimism, nihilism and controversy of *Crow* (1970) explore the mysterious entities that escape both human and divine control. Hughes describes the human condition at its most vulnerable, subject to randomness, very dissimilar to a Christian, New Testament God of love and forgiveness. Crow's is a world that has not been created from chaos into order by an all-knowing, almighty divinity, but one projected from chaos onto chaos, misbegotten, thwarted, an accident of creation.

Crow engages with Christian doctrine as a means of critiquing and deconstructing the seminal grand narrative of Western thought. According to Ryan Hibbet¹⁷, Hughes inverts the phallogocentric orientation of Christianity, by restoring the feminine and the demonic to consciousness, while Paul Bentley¹⁸ explains the abundance of dismembered body parts of *Crow* by way of the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque. Crow – or the fallen modern Man, for that matter – is reduced to the state of a child before the mirror stage, when he

¹² Isaiah, 11.8-9

¹³ Dwight Eddins, 'Ted Hughes and Schopenhauer: The Poetry of the Will', *Twentieth Century Literature*, (1999), 45: 1, p. 94

¹⁴ Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957-1994*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p.31

¹⁵ Idem, p. 41

¹⁶ Idem, p. 55

¹⁷ Ryan Hibbet, 'Ted Hughes's *Crow*: An Alternative Theological Paradigm', *Literature & Theology*, 17:1 (2003), p. 18

¹⁸ Paul Bentley, 'Depression and Ted Hughes's *Crow*, or Through the Looking Glass and What Crow Found There' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43:1 (1997), pp 29-30

becomes aware of a coherent self, distinct from others. By rewriting Genesis, Hughes finds a way of accommodating Nature in midst of theology, which he perceives as rejected by the masculinist Christian tradition:

The subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature, and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature - from both inner and outer nature. The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man.....Since Christianity hardened into Protestantism, we can follow nature's underground heretical life, leagued with everything occult, spiritualistic, devilish, over-emotional, bestial, mystical, feminine, crazy, revolutionary, and poetic. (The Spectator, pp. 81-83)¹⁹

Crow, then, embodies Christianity's other, a rejection of the theory of divine design and order. Faced with Crow's blunders, God is a father overcome with pity and helplessness in educating his inadequate progeny. Hughes, thus, proposes a 'Resistance Type A'²⁰ reading of the Bible, attempting to embed the 'others' of Christianity in its very fabric.

Lineage opens with 'In the beginning was Scream'. The ultimate expression of trauma is preferred to the Biblical 'Word' of Revelation. In Genesis, the speech of Divinity is performative, for the commands of God ('Let there be light') coincide with their enactment. By degrading the creative power of logos to the inarticulate primitivism of scream, Hughes offers his view of man and his likeness to God. There follow fourteen lines introduced by 'who', paralleling the lineage of Adam who follows in the book of Genesis. The subsequent births are violent, mortal ones, metaphors of the birth of man after the fall, of Eve begetting in pain: the scream begets Blood, Eye, Fear, then Wing, Bone, Granite, then Violet, Guitar and Sweat proceeding finally to Adam, Mary and God. He, in his turn, begets Nothing, the originator of 'Never/ Never Never Never' who, in due course, is parent to Crow. The by-product of this lineage and heir to Man and God, Crow reinstates the cyclicity of death and the doom of the human condition, reiterating the scream for Blood from the first two lines of the poem. However, the ambivalence of blood as both symbol of life and token of a violent severance of life endow the poem with a circular quality, of civilization held prisoner between a violent inception and a similarly tortured agony. The progeny of this orgy of pain demands that it be fed with 'Blood/Grubs, crusts/ Anything' - a pathetic underling 'Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth'. Like the rest of Creation, Hughes seems to say, Crow hasn't asked to be born - he is an accident, just as the rest of mankind, surviving on the discarded scraps of modernity.

The gospel according to John, the most poetic and beautifully written of the gospels, opens with the same formulae as Genesis - 'In the beginning' - but the act of creation *per se*, the use of the verb-establishing agency in 'God *created* the heavens and the earth' is replaced by sheer presence: 'In the beginning *was* the Word'. In the Bible, thus, the Word inhabits, dwells, occupies space, being one with divinity, being divinity itself. The gospel goes on: 'He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was then light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'²¹ The antithetical pair light/darkness is consistently used oxymoronically by Hughes in *Crow's Fall*, a parodic parallel to Lucifer's fall. White in the beginning, Crow becomes jealous of the sun's brightness, attracted by brightness (as by all things that glitter) upsettingly similar to his own,

¹⁹ Quoted by V. Madhukumar, in 'Ted Hughes's Poetry - The Problem of the Evil of Self-Consciousness', *Language in India*, 11: 3 (2011), p 392

²⁰ In the Introduction to *Greening Paul. Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), the authors embark on a survey of ecotheological thought. Attitudes towards green readings of the Bible are classified as follows: theories of 'Recovery' or 'Retrieval' (the Bible has been misinterpreted/mistranslated, it is not originally anthropocentric or misogynistic) versus theories of 'Resistance' (of types A - some biblical texts are, indeed, counter-ecological and must be exposed and resisted, and B - the Bible is rightfully andro- and anthro-centric, ecology is rejected). p 31

²¹ The Gospel According to John, 1.1-5

and attacks it, to the effect of crow's charring, justifying his idiotic behaviour by claiming that 'Up there, (...)/ Where white is black and black is white, I won'.

Crow's awkward stupidity exposes the absurd futility of order-bestowing myth. The *Crow and the Birds*, for instance, enumerates in deceptively lyrical tone the diversity of ornithological creation taking possession of a man-made cityscape. The eagle soars through a dawn 'distilling of emerald', while the curlew 'trawled in seadusk through the chime of glasses' – the metaphors pertain to analogies in the sphere of trivial human activity, the distilling of wine, the dark green glasses of the bottles in which the alcohol will be stored, its implied consumption between dawn and dusk, the vapid clinking of glasses touching. The birds criss-cross in flight the residual noises of urban modernity, trying to extricate themselves: 'And the bluetit zipped clear of lace panties/ And the woodpecker drummed clear of the rotovator and the rose-farm/ And the peewit tumbled clear of the laundromat'. Crow, unaware as always of the deeper significance of things, and emphasizing the very lack of any significance, abstracts itself from the fate of his fellow birds, ransacking the rubbish of the city: 'Crow spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage,/ guzzling a dropped ice-cream.'

Nature and religion are akin, in the sense that, confined by language, they are both inadequate at encompassing divinity – thus, they both make use of metaphors to express the inexpressible:

A poet must be able to claim... freedom to follow the vision of poetry, the imaginative vision of poetry. . . . And, in any case, poetry is religion, religion is poetry. The message of the New Testament is poetry. Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor; and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and as preacher as one who is to present poetry; and when I preach poetry I am preaching Christianity, and when one discusses Christianity one is discussing poetry in its imaginative aspects. The core of both are imagination as far as I'm concerned.. . My work as poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truth.²²

Opposed to Hughes' theology of resistance, Thomas' functions along irretrievably Christian patterns. Despite occasional oscillations between faith and doubt, Thomas is essentially a rehabilitator of theology, sharing with Hughes an abhorrence of modernity and the machine. In his early poetry, informed primarily by the beauty of the Welsh hills where God teases his poet-priest in a game of hide-and-seek, of alternating presence and absence, Thomas offers a rather anthropocentric view on Creation. Nature is praised as the ultimate proof of divine craftsmanship, but the voice of the poet-priest is superior, self-conscious, masculinist. The peasants and their wives are barred from the minister's transcendent insights. The priest-poet deplors the lack of imagination of the human dwellers of God's creation, the backwardness of Prytherch, who fails to raise his eyes from the land and search for the higher order of things. As if plucked directly from an Old Testament primitivism, Iago Prytherch resembles an Adam or a Cain without self-consciousness (*A Peasant* : 'There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind'²³), the essential man of dust, spending his life grappling with the land that gave life to him and will receive his body after death. It is a life of hardship in a landscape that repays toil with the thorns and thistles of God's banishment from Paradise: 'This is the land where men labour/In silence, and the rusted harrow/Breaks its teeth on the grey stones.'²⁴ (*The Minister*²⁴). *Forest Dwellers*²⁵ speaks of 'Men who have hardly uncurled/from their posture in the/ womb. Naked. Heads bowed, not/ in prayer, but in contemplation/of the earth they came from,/that suckled them on the brown/milk that builds

²² Cf. William V. Davis, 'R. S. Thomas: Poet-Priest of the Apocalyptic Mode', *South Central Review*, 4:4 (1987), p. 92

²³ R. S. Thomas, *Selected Poems, The Stones of the Fields* (1946), p. 1.

²⁴ Idem, *The Minister* (1953), p.7

²⁵ Idem, *Between Here and Now* (1981), p. 145

bone not brain.’ This primitivism is not redemptive, neither is the opposite world, governed by the almighty machine. The priest-poet alone seems to be able to communicate with the Maker. Thomas’ treatment of the feminine is also significant. When he does relinquish the masculine, intellectualized existential concerns and probe the otherness of femininity, it is often a portrait that pales when compared to that of the man. In *Anniversary*²⁶, the communion between man and wife is ambiguous. They open ‘the door /To friend and stranger’, but who opens ‘the womb/Softly to let enter/The one child/With its huge hunger.’? Is it God, is it the husband? It is both husband and wife? The woman is seen only in the posture of vessel/passive recipient, just like nature, to be filled with the life-giving agency of creative masculinity. The womb, the female body²⁷, is not ‘useful’ unless given purpose by the agency of God, the husband or the poet priest. There are no women who think, ask questions, (nor are men, for that matter, except Thomas who does all the thinking and asks all the questions on behalf of the congregation) or simply exist except as a counterpart or ‘helper’ for man. In *The Woman*²⁸, God justifies the creation of Eve in terms of ‘the generations that would navigate/by those great stars’. Her lot is domesticity: ‘Hers is the clean apron, good for fire, /Or lamp to embroider as we talk slowly/in the long kitchen, While the white dough/Turns to pastry in the great oven’²⁹(*Farm Wife*). We do hear Walter Llywarch’s perception of the spouse (*Walter Llywarch*³⁰: ‘I took instead, as others had done/ Before, a wife from the black pews’), God’s or the priest’s, but never the woman’s.

The moors are essentially edenic, paralleling God’s incomprehensibility to the human mind, but their inhabitants are not. God himself, in the later poetry of R.S.Thomas, is imagined as a crafty technocrat, operating the destiny of humanity behind an elaborate switchboard (‘God smiled. The controls/ were working: the small /eaten by the large, the large/ by the larger’ – *B.C.*, p.208); ‘The mythology of a species:/ Jesus Christ? Muhamad ? But only/the wind is real. We have tried /personalizing it as divine breath, / but the answer of the universe /is ‘OM! OM!’³¹. Hughes prefers the theological alternative of nature as instinctual goddess, fertile and perseverant, the vital energy that will ultimately prevail, surviving even the destructiveness of man, a force of post-natural propensity in its democratic embracing of creation and destruction, life and death. Thomas’s Christian model, while praising creation, subjects it to Almighty Divinity – one cannot be too sure whether nature is praiseworthy in itself, or just because it is the expression of God’s majesty. The moor becomes a Church, the farmers toil for a living in the field as temporary tenants of God’s estate, the land is a canvas on which the Maker’s brush continuously paints an already completed scene. Thomas allows nature to inhabit the poems, but the lyrical voice that utters the praise is that of the priest-poet: he blesses the moors, with their sinful and righteous alike, but he rationalizes/intellectualizes the non-human.

500 years after Luther, theology in Western civilization undergoes a postmodern reformation by meeting ecological concerns half-way and embracing the ethics of eco-thought. Ecotheology and ecocritique propose revisionist readings of modern civilization that oscillate between the rejection of anthropocentricity and the inevitable return to an all too human perspective. Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas, while voicing anti-modern stances and bemoaning the usurpation of spirituality by technology, are also ‘makers of poetry’, thus inherently occupying, God-like, a superior plane in their relationship with nature. The crux for

²⁶ Idem, *Tares* (1961) p.43

²⁷ Tony Brown’s essay, ‘Eve’s Ruse: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas’, explores the instances in Thomas’ poetry where the woman is seen as a creature of flesh, a seductress who distracts the male from its intellectual pursuits. (published in *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 49:195 (2000), pp 229–250)

²⁸ Idem, *Frequencies* (1978), p. 121

²⁹ Idem, *Poetry for Supper* (1958), p.40

³⁰ Idem, *Tares*, p. 42

³¹ Idem, *Preference*, p. 244

both is to be able to forge viable alternative spiritual models without succumbing to the rationalizing arrogance of Fallen Man. By denouncing, in *Crow*, the debased Creation of industrialized modernity, Hughes expresses a primordial yearning, almost a death-wish, for the return to paradisiacal Nature. The raw, instinctual predators of the volumes preceding *Crow* (*The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal*, *Recklings*, *Wodwo*) are no longer a spiritual refuge for the seeker of authenticity. In *Crow*, the most pessimistic of Hughes's volumes of poetry, nature is contaminated beyond repair: it has become post-nature, a wasteland witnessing the predictable agony of fallen man and fallen nature. For R.S. Thomas, though, nature preserves its redemptive quality despite its quintessential inscrutability: like God himself, nature is enigmatic and compelling for reasons that exceed man's capacity of understanding, a thing the poet-priest occasionally struggles to accept. The Christian pattern embraced by Thomas interprets Creation as the irrefutable proof of divine almightiness, but not without frustration at its capricious elusiveness of a God that sometimes seems to inhabit the fields, like a Church³², while at others the moors bear witness to an overwhelming absence³³. Despite its rhizomic branching, ecocritique seems to be developing along counter-postmodern lines, endorsing a return to a unitary worldview that, surpassing solipsism and fragmentariness, acknowledges and respects otherness. The 'interconnectedness' principle of ecocriticism can be identified in current critical trends, following a postmodernity that allows feminism, postcolonialism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies not only to co-exist democratically, but also engage with one another in interdisciplinary fashion.

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³² *The Moor*: 'It was like a church to me./ I entered it on soft foot, /Breath held like a cap in the hand. It was quiet./ God made himself felt./ Not listened to, in clean colours/ That brought a moistening of the eye./ In movement of the wind over grass.', *Pietà*, p.61

³³ J. D. Vicary, 'Via negativa: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas'

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