

Deconstructing Gregor

Fiction and Narrative across Media

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COLLÈGE
DE FRANCE
—1530—



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Prelude: on deconstruction

The great beetle debate

Against Nabokov

Free imagination: a practical problem

Outlines of a theory of adaptations applied to Gregor

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Kafka's opening

- ▶ Here is the opening line of *The Metamorphosis*:

Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt.

- ▶ And Joachim Neugroschel's translation in (Kafka 1915):

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.

- ▶ In (Nabokov 1980), Nabokov asks: what kind of *vermin* has poor Gregor turned into?
 - ▶ Everybody agrees that *must* be some sort of *insect*.
 - ▶ But: What kind of insect?

Non-starters

- ▶ Gregor is *indeterminate* in the fiction.
 - ▶ At best, we should say that he is *under-determinate*.
- ▶ *Kafka's intentions* do not help:
 - ▶ In a letter to his editor (April 2, 1913) after receiving the proofs of his story Kafka insisted: “the insect itself cannot be depicted” (*das Insekt selbst kann nicht gezeichnet werden*)
 - ▶ (Barker 2021: 205) makes an interesting comment about this letter:

This is a telling comment, especially in an era which delighted in the detailed representation of biological minutiae (Haeckel's Welträtsel is typical). Kafka does not veto a representation of the creature (he would in that case have written “darf nicht gezeichnet werden”), but stresses rather how the “insect” of his imagination is incapable of being depicted (“kann nicht gezeichnet werden”).

- ▶ So, what has Gregor turned into?

(Nabokov 1980)'s argument

1. *Intuitive reading*: Gregor is a giant cockroach.
2. **Counter-argument**:
 - ▶ *Entomological data*: Cockroaches are flat on both sides and have long legs.
 - ▶ *Fictional data*: Gregor is manifestly round, back and belly, and he has short legs.¹
3. *Entomological reading*: Gregor is a giant beetle.
 - ▶ This argument is termed “the great beetle debate” in (Friend 2011):
 - ▶ Stacie opposes the *intuitive reading* (Smith's) and the *entomological reading* (Nabokov's).
 - ▶ In the context of a *debate*, both are forced to justify their readings.
 - ▶ **Note**₁: In principle, one could think of other readings:
 - ▶ A bedbug (Moncrieff [trans.] 2014); a woodlouse (Barker 2021: 207); ...
 - ▶ **Note**₂: Nabokov was a reknown lepidopterist (hence entomologist).

¹*Evidence*: He has enormous difficulties turing on it's belly in the opening scene. ≡ ▶ ≡ ↺ 🔍 ↻

hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, flimmered [*flicker* + *shimmer*] helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. . . .

"Gregor's eyes turned next to the window—one could hear rain drops beating on the tin of the windowsill's outer edge and the dull weather made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he tried to hurl himself on his right side he always swung back to the supine position. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes* to keep from seeing his wriggly legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.

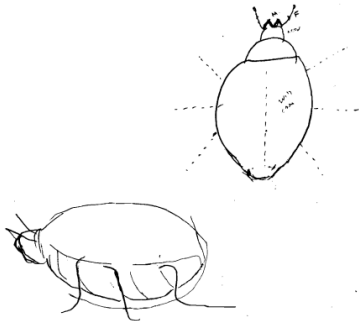
"Ach Gott, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. Many more anxieties on the road than in the office, the plague of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, casual acquaintances never to be seen again, never to become intimate friends. The hell with it all! He felt a slight itching on the skin of his belly; slowly pushed himself on his back nearer the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily; identified the itching place which was covered with small white dots the nature of which he could not understand and tried to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him."

Now what exactly is the "vermin" into which poor Gregor, the seedy commercial traveler, is so suddenly transformed? It obviously belongs to the branch of "jointed leggers" (*Arthropoda*), to which insects, and spiders, and centipedes, and crustaceans belong. If the "numerous little legs" mentioned in the beginning mean more than six legs, then Gregor would not be an insect from a zoological point of view. But I suggest that a man awakening on his back and finding he has as many as six legs vibrating in the air might feel that six was sufficient to be called numerous. We shall therefore assume that Gregor has six legs, that he is an insect.

Next question: what insect? Commentators say *cockroach*, which of course does not make sense. A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape

*VN's note in his annotated copy: "A regular beetle has no eyelids and cannot close its eyes—a beetle with human eyes." About the passage in general he has the note: "In the original German there is a wonderful flowing rhythm here in this dreamy sequence of sentences. He is half-awake—he realizes his plight without surprise, with a childlike acceptance of it, and at the same time he still clings to human memories, human experience. The metamorphosis is not quite complete as yet." Ed.

with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. He approaches a cockroach in only one respect: his coloration is brown. That is all. Apart from this he has a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases. In beetles these cases conceal flimsy little wings that can be expanded and then may carry the beetle for miles and miles in a blundering flight. Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings.) Further, he has strong mandibles. He uses these organs to turn the key in a lock while standing erect on his hind legs, on his third pair of legs (a strong little pair), and this gives us the length of his body, which is about three feet long. In the course of the story he gets gradually accustomed to using his new appendages—his feet, his feelers. This brown, convex, dog-sized beetle is very broad. I should imagine him to look like this:



Assessing Nabokov's argument

- ▶ Nabokov's argument, if valid, is enthymematic:
 - ▶ One needs to motivated the extra-premise according to which the entomological data is *relevant* and *combines smoothly* with the fictional data.
- ▶ One can argue against Nabokov on both grounds:
 1. The details of entomology is irrelevant, and Kafka's reader is not supposed to know anything special about entomology to appreciate his work.
 2. Even if entomology was relevant, there is an upper limit to the scientific knowledge to bring into the fiction: beyond that limit, inconsistencies appear when combined with explicit fictional data.

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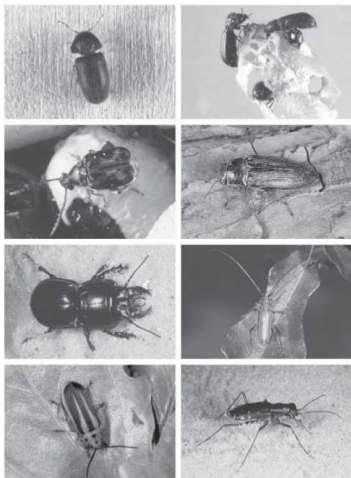
Irrelevant entomology

- ▶ What kind of beetle?
- ▶ “Beetles are by far the largest order of insects: the roughly 400,000 species make up about 40% of all insect species so far described, and about 25% of all animals.”²
 - ▶ As J.B.S. Haldane put it: “The Creator, if He exists, has a special preference for beetles.”
- ▶ Here are a few from (Capinera 2008):

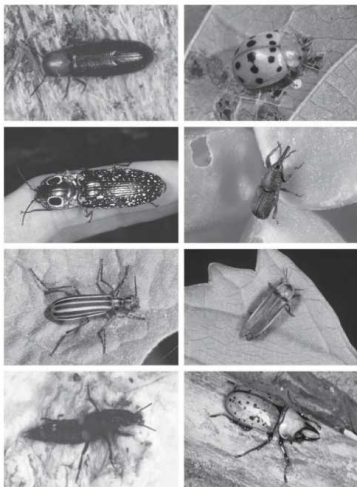
²Wikipedia contributors. (2022, September 3). Beetle. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 13:39, September 19, 2022, from

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Beetle&oldid=1108205421>

Beetles (Coleoptera)



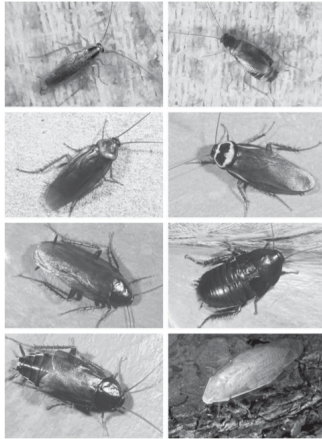
Beetles (Coleoptera), Figure 32 Some representative beetles: top left, drugstore beetle, *Stegobium paniceum* (Anobiidae); top right, lesser grain borer, *Rhyzopertha dominica* (Bostrichidae); second row left, cowpea weevil, *Callosobruchus maculatus* (Bruchidae); second row right, *Buprestis lineatus* (Buprestidae); third row left, *Pasimachus sublaevis* (Carabidae); third row right, banded hickory borer, *Knulliana cincta* (Cerambycidae); bottom left, *Trirhabda bacharidis* (Chrysomelidae); bottom right, *Cicindela punctulata* (Carabidae) (photos by Lyle Buss).



Beetles (Coleoptera), Figure 33 Some additional representative beetles: top left, *Neorthopleura thoracica* (Cleridae); top right, Mexican bean beetle, *Epilachna varivestis* (Coccinellidae); second row left, eyed dick beetle, *Alaus oculatus* (Elatridae); second row right, maize weevil, *Sitophilus zeamais* (Curculionidae); third row left, striped blister beetle, *Epicauta vittata* (Meloidae); third row right, a firefly, *Photinus tanytoxus* (Lampyridae); bottom left, a rove beetle, *Platydracus fossator* (Staphylinidae); bottom right, Hercules beetle, *Dynastes titus* (Scarabaeidae) (*Dynastes* and *Epilachna* by Jim Castner; other photos by Lyle Buss).

As for cockroaches: more than 4000 species...

Cockroaches (Blattodea)



Cockroaches (Blattodea). Figure 70 Some common cockroaches: top left, German cockroach, *Blattella germanica*; top right, brown-banded cockroach, *Supella longipalpa*; second row left, American cockroach, *Periplaneta americana*; second row right, Australian cockroach, *Periplaneta australasiae*; third row left, smoky-brown cockroach, *Periplaneta fuliginosa*; third row right, Florida woods cockroach, *Eurycotis*

Worse...



Diploptera punctata (the Pacific beetle cockroach) – mimic of brown beetles



Prosoplecta (cockroaches) – mimic of ladybird beetles

Some species of cockroaches evolved to mimic beetles

Entomology ad absurdum

- ▶ Even if entomological knowledge was relevant to reading *the Metamorphosis*, it does not combine smoothly with the fictional data:
 - ▶ In (Haldane 1926), we learn that “while vertebrates carry the oxygen from the gills or lungs all over the body in the blood, insects take air directly to every part of their body by tiny blind tubes called tracheae which open to the surface at many different points.”
 - ▶ As a consequence of this breathing mechanism, “hardly any insects are much more than half an inch thick.”
- ▶ So, entomology tells us that if Gregor was an insect the size of a dog...
 - ▶ ... he would suffocate.
 - ▶ And that is incompatible with what is explicitly true in the fiction.

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Why should we care?

- ▶ The GBD is a problem about *elucidation*, following (Friend 2017)'s tripartite distinction:
 - ▶ *Elucidation*: “to determine what is going on in the storyworld, what is ‘true in the story’.”
 - ▶ *Explication*: “the element of interpretation for which talk of *meaning* makes the most sense, as it aims to gloss particular words, phrases, sentences, and passages in context.”
 - ▶ *Thematic interpretation*: to identify the themes and theses of a fiction considered as a whole.
- ▶ **Distinction**:
 - ▶ *Substantial* elucidation: the result of the elucidation problem feeds into the other kinds of interpretations.
 - ▶ *Trivial* elucidation: the result of the elucidation problem is independent from the other kinds of interpretations.
- ▶ **Note**: philosophers generally like cases of trivial elucidation while literary theorists like cases of substantial elucidation.³

³Nabokov's master stroke consists in arguing that the GBD is in fact a *substantial* case of elucidation, despite appearances to the contrary.

Taking stock

- ▶ We have looked at the GBD as a theoretical problem: a problem about the *interpretation of the Metamorphosis*
 - ▶ What counts as true in the fiction?
 - ▶ How do we know?
 - ▶ Is there a fact of the matter?
- ▶ My (non-exhaustive) discussion of Nabokov's argument is aporetic: we shall never know the ultimate nature of Gregor's.
 - ▶ And so maybe this is uninteresting.
- ▶ **Csq:** there is some room for the reader's freedom.
 - ▶ One should freely imagine the details.
 - ▶ That is in line with intuition.
- ▶ This csq can be seen as an *interesting* empirical claim, i.e. free imagination exists.

The GBD as a *practical* problem

- ▶ Instead of looking at Nabokov's argument *in the abstract*, one can look at practical problems which are connected to the elucidation problem.
- ▶ These come from *adaptations* of the story. It is useful to distinguish between 2 very different types of adaptations:
 1. Translations;
 2. Adaptations to non-linguistic media.
- ▶ **Normative claim:** A *good* adaptation of Kafka's *the Metamorphosis* is one that respects the reader's freedom that we identified above.
 - ▶ Equivalently, a *bad* adaptation is one which disrespects the reader's freedom,
 - ▶ i.e. in which there is a definite answer to the elucidation problem ("What kind of creature is Gregor?")

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Translations

The phrase "ungeheueren Ungeziefer" in particular has been rendered in many different ways by translators.^[17] These include:

- "gigantic insect" (Muir, 1948)
- "monstrous vermin" (Corngold, 1972, Neugroschel, 1993/1995, Freed, 1996)
- "giant bug" (Underwood, 1981)
- "monstrous insect" (Pasley, 1992)
- "enormous bug" (Appelbaum, 1996)
- "gargantuan pest" (Roberts, 2005)
- "monstrous cockroach" (Hofmann, 2007)
- "horrible vermin" (Wyllie, 2009)
- "large verminous insect" (Williams, 2011)
- "some sort of monstrous insect" (Bernofsky, 2014)

From [wikipedia](#) "The Metamorphosis"

- ▶ In French: "insecte" (Bernard Lortholary); "vermine" (Alexandre Vialatte); "cancrelat" (Claude David)
- ▶ (Barker 2021: 198): "It is a reflection both of its enduring appeal and of its intractability that few short prose narratives have been so often translated as Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915)"

As Susan Bernofsky observes⁴: “the epithet *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* in the opening sentence poses one of the greatest challenges to the translator”, and from the outset they have recognized a choice between two main options. The first, and probably simpler, was instigated by the Muirs (1948). Although almost certainly unaware that their usage mirrors Kafka’s, they replace his non-specific “*Ungeziefer*” with something more definable, an “insect”. This then became the preferred gambit for most subsequent translators. The other option, chosen by Lloyd, was to hold true to Kafka’s text, and translate “*Ungeziefer*” with “vermin”. This, however, raises a syntactical problem: because “vermin”, like “*Ungeziefer*”, is an uncountable noun, Kafka’s original combination of indefinite article + adjective + noun is not available in English usage. In order to mirror Kafka’s choice of vocabulary, the syntax has to be adapted. Lloyd’s solution is to write “a monstrous kind of vermin”. A further option, and the most radical, is that first adopted by Stanley Corngold in 1972. He translates “*ein ungeheures Ungeziefer*” with the literal, but ungrammatical, “a monstrous vermin”. In so doing, he places his work in a school of thought which has long held that readers of translated texts should be reminded of the ‘foreignness’ of their source. (Barker 2021: 206)

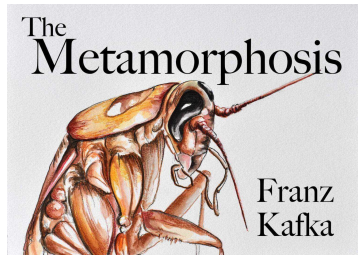
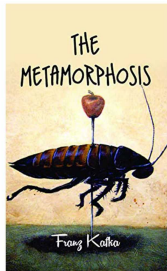
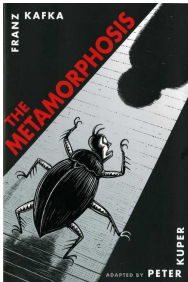
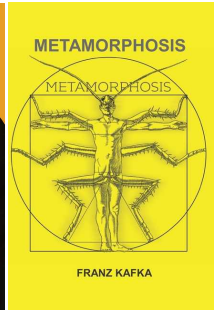
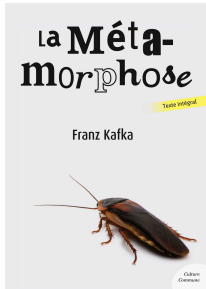
⁴In “On Translating Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’” (2014).

Varieties of visual media

- ▶ *The Metamorphosis* has been adapted as:
 - ▶ films;
 - ▶ telefilms;
 - ▶ comics;
 - ▶ video games;
 - ▶ operas;
 - ▶ dancing;
 - ▶ ...
- ▶ **Main (trivial) claim:** The constraints and possibilities of each medium are different, so there is no general recipe for adapting “free imagination”.
- ▶ I'll focus on *prima facie* extreme cases.
 - ▶ Book covers
 - ▶ Ballet

Deconstructing Gregor

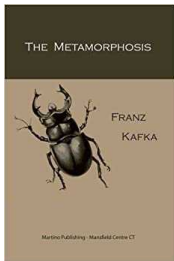
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Deconstructing a Gregory

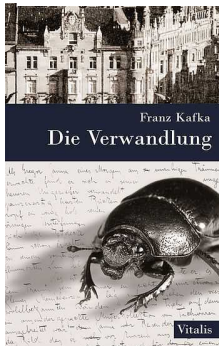
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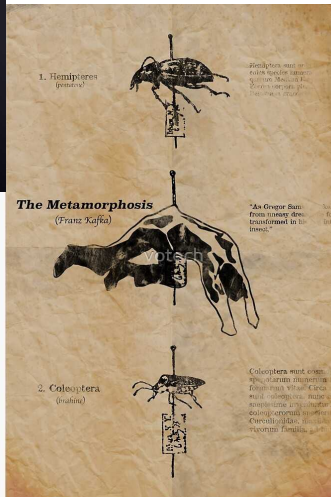


CLASSIC
BIG SIZE

FRANZ
KAFKA
Metamorfoza
și alte povestiri

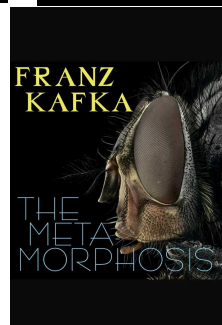
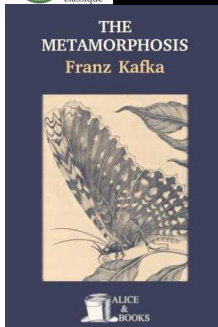
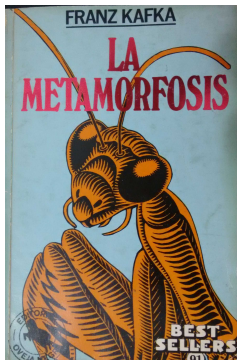
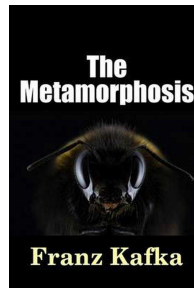
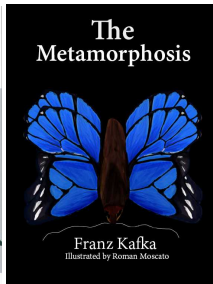
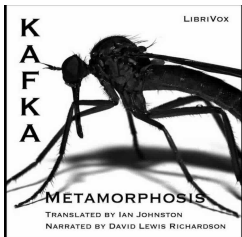


FRANZ
KAFKA



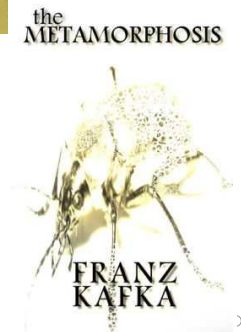
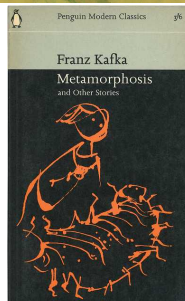
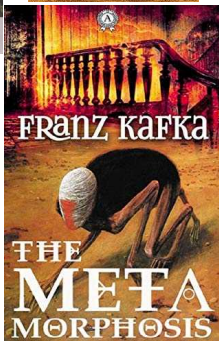
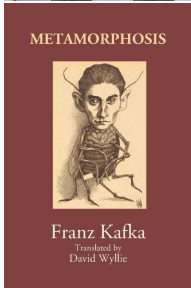
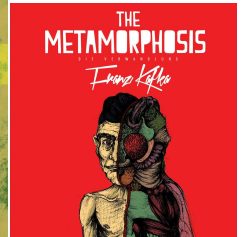
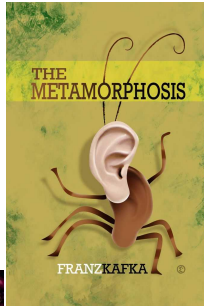
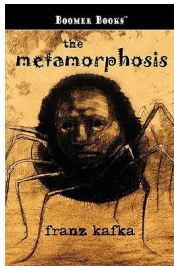
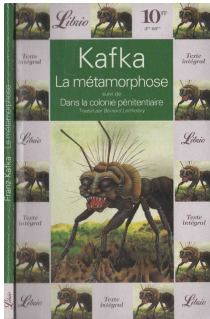
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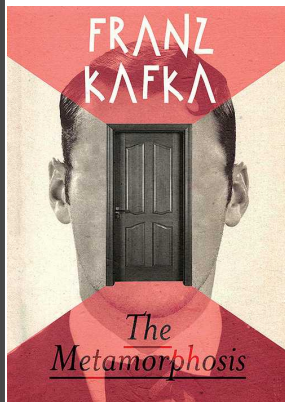
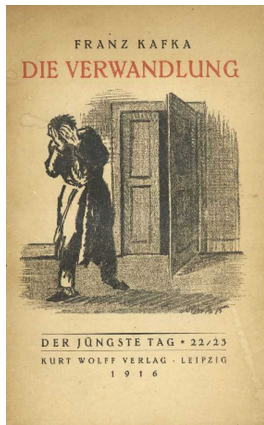
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Book covers: no direct representation



Israel Galván (flamenco dancer) describes Gregor:








When I read Kafka, I imagined how the insect would dance. I considered some change in dancing techniques, so that I could reach a new way of moving one's body. It came from the fact that I was considered a "strange animal" ("un bicho raro") in my family. On the other hand, as if to play, I began to see other dancers as insects... I classified dancers. For instance Mario Maya was the praying mantis, Farruco the scorpion, Enrique el Cojo the beetle, El Guïto and Vicente Escudero other insects... For "La Metamorfosis", I based myself on Mario Maya, Enrique el Cojo, El Guïto et Farruco.^a



Photo: Hugo Gumiel

^aIn "Entretien avec Israel Galván" 2016, par Chantal Maria Albertini.

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