

## THREE SOLDIER-POETS: RUPERT BROOKE, EDWARD THOMAS AND ISAAC ROSENBERG

Arş. Gör. Şafak ALTUNSOY  
Selçuk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi  
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü  
[altunsoy@metu.edu.tr](mailto:altunsoy@metu.edu.tr)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5573-1121>

### Abstract

This study tries to evaluate Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," Edward Thomas' "Adlestrop" and Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" by demonstrating the three poets' ideological stances during WWI. The difficulties of the trench life are apparent in their poems but what makes their poems different from each other is the ideology lying behind the poems. Brooke, Thomas, and Rosenberg represent three different perspectives on the popular patriotism and Englishness during the war period. While Brooke's poems function as a deliberate representation of the dominant government policies, the poems of Thomas and Rosenberg create an opponent voice by delineating the harsh conditions of the war period and hollowness of the policies about war.

**Keywords:** Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, war poetry, soldier-poet.

## ÜÇ ASKER ŞAİR: RUPERT BROOKE, EDWARD THOMAS VE ISAAC ROSENBERG

### Öz

Bu çalışma Rupert Brook'un "Asker," Edward Thomas'ın "Adlestrop" ve Isaac Rosenberg'in "Siperlerde Gün Ağarması" şiirlerini Birinci Dünya savaşında şairlerin ideolojik duruşunu göstermek maksadıyla incelemektedir. Siper yaşamının zorlukları şiirlerde açıkça görülmektedir ancak şiirleri birbirinden farklı kılan şey şiirlerin arkasında yatan ideolojidir. Brooke, Thomas ve Rosenberg savaş döneminde rağbet gören vatanseverlik ve İngilizlik üzerine üç farklı bakış açısını temsil eder. Brooke şiiri hâkim devlet politikalarının açık bir temsili olarak görünürken, Thomas ve Rosenberg şiirleri savaş politikalarının saçmalığını ve dönemin zorluklarını vurgulayarak karşıt bir ses oluşturur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, savaş şiiri, asker şair.

## INTRODUCTION

When World War I broke out in 1914, it was also leading to a new upheaval that would be characterised by a persistent change in social, political and literary grounds. Rising militarism and nationalism resulted in the declaration of a great campaign against the assaults of Germany after its invasion of Belgium and France. The war's aims were designated in accordance with the long-term interests and foreign policies of great empires involved: German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman and British governments.

As George Parfitt states "the technology of armies was also transformed" and in spite of the common chivalric spirit and chauvinism popular among the opposing forces, traditional weaponry such as sword, shield, and horse gradually became obsolete through the constant use of tanks, gas bombs, machine guns and shell (1990: 6). Thus an unprecedented number of casualties and the hard conditions of trench life in the battlefield caused a strong attrition by creating a long lasting harassment and despair. The bleak situation of war directly influenced the poets producing in the first two decades of the twentieth century since "no previous war in which these islands were involved left any poetic harvest at all from the actual combatants" (Lehmann 1982: 7). John Lehmann maintains that "the First World War was the first in which ordinary educated English civilians took part, either by voluntary enlistment or later conscription" (1982: 7). In this respect, although Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, and Isaac Rosenberg had different responses to the First World War, what they produced was shaped within the limitations of the pre-war condition and its experience.

Dominic Hibberd suggests that "a precise definition has never been agreed" for the term "war poet" and adds that "in 1914, the war poet was certainly expected to be a representative . . . he had to speak for the nation and steel its heart for the battle" (1981: 12). However, "the change in the role of the poet from encourager of war to participant" as Simon Featherstone puts it, led to the development of other responses represented by Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg (1995: 15). In other words, they took a stand against the heroic and patriotic voice of Rupert Brooke because the frontline experiences shattered all the illusions such as 'a war to end all wars' created at home by various power groups.

War poetry is positioned between the Georgians and the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. According to Fred Crawford "the importance of the war poetry lies more in its content than in its technique, more in what the poetry says than in how the poetry says it" (1988: 24) and this position of the poets between post-Victorian and modernist poetries seems awkward by being "delayed and incomplete" in Hobsbaum's words (qtd. in Crawford 1988: 24). Although "the poetry of 1914-1918 barely affected the Modernist movement of 1920's" (Press 1983: 11), it is possible to find some similarities between its predecessor, the Georgians and the war poets such as the celebration of England and nostalgic representation of English countryside, and avoiding a complicated and obscure style.<sup>1</sup> However, most war poets of Britain replaced the artificial romanticism of Georgians with a realistic description to convey their experiences and observations to a totally ignorant society about what is happening on the frontline. But the poets' aim ironically led to another extremity by mitigating and rationalising the realities of war, which is valid especially for the ones composing poems with a patriotic concern.

## ENROLLING IN THE ARMY: DESIRE OR DUTY?

Brooke, Thomas, and Rosenberg represent three different perspectives on the popular patriotism and Englishness during the war period. Brooke, as being isolated from the reality of frontline because of his inexperience about war, stands for the national bard chanting the heroic

<sup>1</sup> Even though, Rosenberg aims to write a simple poem, he says that "the dominating idea [is to be] understandable and still ungraspable" (qtd. in Silkin 1998: 306).

deeds of England's soldiers against tyranny. As Simon Featherstone points out, "the crisis of the First World War demanded new ways of defining and communicating national identity and purpose" (1995: 25). Thus the cult of Brooke was created for emphasizing the rightness of war and sacrifices of young people through several contexts such as the preaching of the Dean of St. Paul to "widows, parents and orphans." The dean, for instance, praises Brooke with the following words; "the expression of a pure and elevated patriotism had never found a nobler expression" after reading "Soldier" (qtd. in Stallworthy 2002: 7). Moreover, his death on the way to Gallipoli, his burial under an olive tree in a Greek island and Churchill's long obituary on his death crowned the myth of 'golden-haired Apollo'.

William Cooke suggests a distinction between "subtle (private) patriotism" and "deliberate (public) patriotism" and places Thomas in the private patriotism by quoting from his "Anthologies and Reprints" in *Poetry and Drama* (1914); "the worst of the poetry being written today is that it is too deliberately, and not inevitably, English. It is for an audience: there is more in it of the shouting of rhetorician, reciter, or politician than of the talk of friends and lovers" (218). So, Thomas' argument above can be read as a direct criticism of Brooke by underlining the basic difference between the poetries of Thomas and Brooke in attitude.

Edward Thomas joined the army as a result of ruralised understanding of the national identity. Eleanor Farjeon, a friend of Thomas "asked Thomas if he knew what he was fighting for: 'He stopped, and picked up a pinch of earth. 'Literally for this'. Thomas believed he would be fighting not so much for the nation as for the land" (qtd. in Silkin 1987: 88). In other words, "his war poems are of those of a countryman perceiving the violence done by a distant conflict to the natural order of things" (Stallworthy 2002: 139).

Isaac Rosenberg did not enrol in the Military for patriotic ideals. Already being alienated because of his Jewish origin and exposure to discrimination in England, his motivation was originated from the hardship of his personal life. Similar to Thomas, he coped with monetary problems through all his life and as Parsons points out "he enlisted purely in order to help his family, having been told that half his pay could be paid to his Mother as a 'separation allowance'" (1984: 14). Thus, he represents just the opposite of Brooke's stance in both poetic style, physical appearance (a badly-nourished man vs. a national epitome of patriotism), and idealisation by the public (racially discriminated soldier vs. golden-haired Apollo).

Thomas and Rosenberg occupy a position between two poles represented by Brooke and Owen-Sassoon poetries. For instance, Thomas's "I hate not Germans, nor grow hot/ With the love of Englishmen, to please newspapers" in beginning lines of "This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong" describes the scepticism of Rosenberg. Although Thomas' stance returns to a patriotic ground in the end, as Haines states "he did not embrace it passionately like Rupert Brooke, nor revolt from it as passionately as did Wilfred Owen" (qtd. in Motion 1991: 92). In other words, Thomas' and Rosenberg's approaches to war are indirect; While Rosenberg expresses the harassment of trench life and the absurdity of war through irony, Thomas employs the descriptions of rustic life and "those aspects of the country he had enlisted to defend" (Motion 1991: 92).

### THE ROMANTICIZED: "THE SOLDIER"

"Rupert Brooke was 27 years old when the First World War began, and his reputation as a poet of that war depends almost entirely on the five 'War Sonnets' published in *New Numbers* in 1915" (Parfitt 1990: 20). The five sonnets; "Peace", "Safety", "The Dead", "The Dead" and "The Soldier" known as 1914 share a musical fluency, the emphasis on the love of one's country and nobility of self-sacrifice. All of the five poems idealise the current situation of war and set the

ground for the pro-war discourse. Among them "The Soldier" by Brooke is the best-known poem opening with a heroic wish;

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. (2015:59)

The poem begins with the notion of death and how death is perceived by the soldier. In spite of being in a different country, the fallen soldier transforms the "foreign field" into homeland. Hence Brooke glorifies dying for one's country. On the contrary, in "No One Cares Less than I" (written in 1916) Edward Thomas reacts against such idealisation of war with the following lines;

"No one cares less than I,  
Nobody knows but God,  
Whether I am destined to lie  
Under a foreign clod,"  
Were the words I made to the bugle call in the morning. (1998: 38)

The celebration of death continues through the praise of soldier in "In that rich earth a richer dust concealed" (Brooke 2015: 59). By denoting the flesh of soldier, this biblical dust<sup>2</sup> gains a symbolic quality to represent the organic relation to England with "a body of England" and "breathing English air". The lines "A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware/ Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam" (59) explain the reason behind the desire for duty by referring to the beauties of the English countryside. The repetition of "England" three times describes the poetic persona's jingoistic tendencies.

The mother image refers to that now it is soldier's turn to pay back the gratitude devoted by his country. Accordingly, England is personified through words like "bore," "shaped" and "her" in "bore, shaped, made aware, Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam" (59). Frank Field explains why Brooke prefers such personifications by suggesting that "the Platonic idea of Englishness in which he had sought refuge in the era before the war was now something to be embodied and defended" (1991: 118).

"Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home" creates a baptism scene and the soldier is cleansed through death. As Parfitt points out, "Brooke had celebrated the coming of war as an event which washed away the dirt of pre-war" (1990: 27). In a similar way, John Galsworthy draws attention to the pun of "suns" by referring to both nature's purification and also to 'sons,' which implies the appreciation of the soldier's valour and self-sacrifice for his country. Furthermore, "all evil shed away" in the second section sustains the idea of cleansing through the war;

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Genesis 13:16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

Job 10:9 Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?

Ecclesiastes 3:20 All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (Brooke 2015:59)

"The Soldier", written in Petrarchan sonnet form deviates from the traditional pattern in rhyming and presenting the subject matter in octave and sestet. The first eight lines are rhymed with the Elizabethan sonnet of abab cdcd, but last six lines follow the regular rhyme scheme of efg efg. The problem is stated in the octave and resolution is given in the sestet in Petrarchan sonnet by combining two seemingly opposing situations. The modification in the rhyme scheme also denotes a change in subject matter. But in the sestet of "The Soldier" the poetic persona does not change his argument. In other words, he continues to describe the patriotic attitude developed in the octave. "A pulse in the eternal mind" suggests the close connection established between soldier and his country. In his own microcosm, he represents and reflects the happy memories or beauties of that macrocosm. "English heaven" in the last line shows the degree of patriotism internalised and brings to mind the question in Gavin Ewart's words, "why should English air be very much different from any other country's air?" (1989: 11).

### THE LOCALIZED: "ADLESTROP"

According to John Press, Edward Thomas "can scarcely be called a war poet: he wrote no poems about fighting or about life in the trenches; almost all his poems that refer to the war do so glancingly; and he probably wrote no poems after he had landed in France" (1983: 27). But he adds that Thomas's fate as a poet was shaped by the outbreak of war. In this respect, "Thomas was essentially a war poet" (1983: 27). As mentioned before, Thomas had financial difficulties, so he needed to earn by "literary journalism" as Howarth puts it and writing potboiler prose work on nature (2007: 70). But "strangely enough army life, after he had enlisted in 1915, lessened the pressure on Thomas and allowed him to write for the first time without financial worries" (Clark 1992: 77).

Written in 1915, "Adlestrop" is based on a visit of Thomas to Frost in August 1914. On his way to Gloucestershire, his train unusually stops and he remembers the moment of tranquillity. As Howarth points out, "much of Thomas's poetry is about such unanticipated moments, being caught off-guard by the surprise of his own poems, by birdsongs or silences, or by his own black and squally depressions" (2007: 70) and "Adlestrop" is the embodiment of a momentarily felt melancholy;

Yes, I remember Adlestrop --  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.  
The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop -- only the name (Thomas 1964: 36)

The poem opens with an interjection which gives the impression of an answer to the question in a dialogue or an incessant remembrance of a certain moment. In the first section, the frame of time and place is drawn and the reason for why the persona only remembers the name of Adlestrop is conveyed in third and fourth lines. The hot atmosphere of "late June" is supported with "one afternoon of heat." The second section follows the languorous air of the first section and stresses upon the immobility of the objects. The incomplete sounds such as "steam hissed" and "someone cleared his throat" interrupt the silence just for a moment then atmosphere turns into stillness again. As Andrew Motion suggests "Thomas wrings from the name 'Adlestrop', by suspending it at the line end, a serious unspoken association with ideal rural communities. But when he returns half way through the poem to repeat 'What I saw/ Was Adlestrop-only the name',

it is a signal for those associations to accelerate away from his reach" (1991: 4). The ultimate isolation leads the persona again to the board on which Adlestrop's name is written and time stops both in the earth and on sky;

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. (Thomas 1964: 36)

In the moment of quietness, the persona's perspective changes from the observation of surrounding objects to a larger scene, but the situation of stillness stays the same. "Hypotactic 'ands' seem to let the impressions flow in naturally and unforcedly" (Howarth 2007: 70). The last section immediately modifies the tranquillity with the sound of "a blackbird" echoed with an exaggeration "all the birds/ Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire."

The announcement of the war and creation of this poem coincides and in spite of a fruitful holiday with Robert Frost in August 1914, "Describing his holiday to Eleanor Farjeon, Thomas said that 'we enjoyed many days but with all sorts of mixed feelings'" (Motion 1991: 87). He implies that he does not disregard the anxiety of war although he is away from the circle of it at that time. As Lehmann points out, "almost all the poems he wrote after 1914-which as far as one knows are all his poems- was an indirect reflection of the war" (1982: 106). In this respect, the last lines of "Adlestrop" can be read as the apprehension of the impending threat to natural order and its resonance. As Howarth argues, "'Adlestrop', then recalls a moment of peace before the war, but both memory and the poem can only exist because of the war and Adlestrop's bright, unpeopled landscape stands out because it seems to prefigure Thomas's own present and future absence from it" (2007: 70).

#### THE RIDICULED: "BREAK OF DAY IN THE TRENCHES"

Brooke, Thomas, and Rosenberg shared the same fate by losing their lives either on the way to the battlefield as it happened in the case of Brooke or on the battlefield from a shell blast or in action. But only Rosenberg wrote poems in the trenches. As officers, Brooke and Thomas did not endure the discrimination or alienation as the private Rosenberg did. "In a passage cancelled by the censor Rosenberg told Marsh, 'what is happening to me now is more tragic than the "passion play". Christ never endured what I endure'" (Cohen 1992: 3). According to Joseph Cohen, "If Brooke's death in 1915 became the symbol of the brave sacrifices of the young, then Rosenberg's death on All Fools' Day in 1918 became the symbol of the futility of such sacrifices" (1992: 5) and Rosenberg reflects this absurdity of war in "Break of Day in the Trenches" in a sardonic way.

Siegfried Sassoon praises Rosenberg's poetry with the following impressions in his "Foreword" to *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*;

1. In reading and re-reading these poems I have been strongly impressed by depth and integrity.
2. I have found a sensitive and vigorous mind energetically interested in experimenting with language.
3. Rosenberg is a fruitful fusion between English and Hebrew culture. Behind all his poetry there is a racial quality- biblical and prophetic.

4. Scriptural and sculptural are the epithets I would apply to him. His imagination had a sinewy and muscular aliveness; often he saw things in terms of sculpture.
5. He modelled words with fierce energy and aspiration, finding ecstasy in form. His poetic visions are mostly in sombre colours.
6. "Break of Day in the Trenches", Sensuous frontline existence is there, hateful and repellent, unforgettable and inescapable. Isaac Rosenberg was naturally empowered with something of the divine spirit which touches our human clay to sublimity of expression. (1984: 9)

According to Lehmann, although Rosenberg hated the war, his reaction was different from the protesting voice of Sassoon, from the insensitivity of the ignorant folk at home as Owen criticised or from the natural descriptions of Blunden or Gurney. His only aim was to express his immediate experience of the war (1982: 119). But as Silkin puts it, "Rosenberg's strength as a 'war poet' arises partly from his ability to particularize powerful physical horror and take it, without losing its presence, to a further stage of consciousness" (1987: 275).

The darkness crumbles away.  
It is the same old druid Time as ever,  
Only a live thing leaps my hand,  
A queer sardonic rat  
As I pull the parapet's poppy  
To stick behind my ear. (Rosenberg 2013:18)

"Break of the Day in the Trenches" opens with a strange description of dawn. Darkness 'crumbling away' in the first line depicts a gradual change of the atmosphere into the light. The verb 'crumble away' adds dimension to darkness a dusty quality which immediately takes us to the muddy or dirty trenches. The movement in the opening line is balanced with the motionless 'Time'.

The persona demarks the frame of the emotions aroused with "break of day" by stressing that a new beginning does not convey to any crumb of hope or positiveness in that situation. Besides unchangeability, the personification of time as "old druid<sup>3</sup>" can imply the time of sacrifice/slaughter has come. The soldier feels a "live thing", a rat when he plucks off the poppy. So liveliness and shortness of life are conveyed with this momentary experience. "Poppy" stands as the symbol of the Great War. Even today poppies are used in the anniversary of WWI by the English soldiers, and there is a military charity fund called as "Poppy Appeal" for helping veterans and their families. With "a queer sardonic rat" image, the persona begins to suggest the absurdity of war through a measured humour by anthropomorphizing the rat. The situation in the trenches is so tragic and hopeless that even the symbol of death and plague holds the soldier up to ridicule and the soldier takes the joke;

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.  
Now you have touched this English hand  
You will do the same to a German  
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure  
To cross the sleeping green between. (Rosenberg 2013:18)

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<sup>3</sup> Druid is a priest or magician in the ancient Celtic religion. Stonehenge is their sacred meeting place. "Greek and Roman accounts of Druids fall into three categories. Some, mostly Greek, treat them as great philosophers and scientists worthy of admiration. Others, mostly Roman, make them into bloodthirsty barbarian priests, epitomes of backwardness, ignorance and cruelty. Yet others, like Caesar, suggest that they were both (Hutton 2009: 2)" because of the myth of human sacrifice performed at dawn.

The speaker addresses to the rat as a humorous person. As Fred Crawford points out, "the roles of the soldier and the rat have become inverted" (1988: 197). Accordingly, "Your cosmopolitan sympathies" creates an ironical criticism of civilisation (Rosenberg 2013:18). The vision of an inferior creature surpasses the human being boasting about his mind and progress in technology. As Silkin points out, "Man may rule the earth, but war is a man-made irrational activity which brings with it absurd, irrational restrictions-national boundaries demarcated with hatred and death" and in this respect, the rat achieves what man cannot, which shows the absurdity of situation (1987: 277).

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,  
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,  
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
The torn fields of France. (Rosenberg 2013:18)

The speaker continues to imagine the rat's mocking stance as it strolls and "watches men in all their bodily pride reduced to short-lived creatures with terror in their eyes" (Press 1983: 52). "Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes" fits the soldier what Brooke represented and idealised. But the line "less chanced than you for life" also overthrows Brooke's soldier romanticising the war since their death is not a sacrifice but a crime or murder, they are scattered like parapets in the trenches or in the shell blasted fields of France. According to Silkin "torn fields" visualise the degree of brutality of war and "vulnerability of man" (1987: 279). By creating a contrast in scale and quality, persona questions the value of human life in war.

What do you see in our eyes  
At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through still heavens?  
What quaver -- what heart aghast?  
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping;  
But mine in my ear is safe –  
Just a little white with the dust. (Rosenberg 2013:18)

In the last lines above, the persona raises two rhetorical questions and the sardonic tone leaves its place to an angrier or distressed voice for a moment. This violence is denoted through "shrieking iron and flame" of constant shell fire. "What quaver-what heart aghast?" deliberately refers to despair and in the following line, the speaker returns to the poppy, symbol of death. In other words, he identifies poppy with the dead body of the soldier. Silkin suggests that "the poppy in his fantasy is nourished by blood that has soaked into the earth and turned the petals red" (1987: 280) and he argues that Rosenberg adds another dimension to this general fantasy; while man nourishes the poppy, it nourishes his mortality in return. Vast numbers of loss and thus vicious circle are given through "drop and are ever dropping" (2013: 18). In the last two lines, the persona regains his humorous tone. Neil Corcoran points out that this kind of devil-may-care attitude creates "an extraordinary image; that of the trench soldier as dandy" (2007: 98) who is worried about the dirt on the poppy as he wears the flower behind his ear. Thus Corcoran suggests that "'Break of Day in the Trenches' learns a style from a despair by not permitting a style to cramp or to dictate, a style" (2007: 99).



### CONCLUSION

To conclude, the comparative analysis of "The Soldier," "Adlestrop" and "Break of the Day in the Trenches" delineate the three different perspectives towards the traumatic impact of WWI. The poems also exemplify ideological stances towards popular patriotism and Englishness during the war period. While the poetic sphere of "The Soldier" idealises the notion of 'nation' in an abstract way, "Adlestrop" localises both Thomas' perception of war and takes the reader's interest from the abstract 'nation' to the concrete 'location.' However, "Break of the Day in the Trenches," not only subverts idealisation of war and death in "The Soldier" by presenting death in its pure corporeality but also shakes the therapeutic presentation of memory in "Adlestrop." On the one hand, Brooke's poem functions as a deliberate representation of the dominant government policies. On the other hand, the poems of Thomas and Rosenberg represent an opponent stance against the romanticized notions about the battle by delineating the harsh conditions of the wartime and hollowness of the war policies.

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