

**“Psychoanalysis, I believe” in wonderland.**  
**Reading and Literature in *A Memoir of the Future***  
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**Abstract**

Instead of calling his trilogy *Memory of the Future*, Bion has chosen to call it *A Memoir*. The word used for the Italian translation, *memoria*, is more ambiguous and omits the distinction. In English the title alerts the reader as to what is to come – a *memoir* – that is, an account of personal recollections. If we investigate what exactly a memoir is as a literary genre, identifying one of the distinctive traits of the memoir as a “commitment to the real”, and adds that such a genre indicates the fundamental human activity of narrating our life story on its own terms.

Just what constitutes reality and truth, and what might right be considered “facts”, is one of the chief arguments that underpin the dialogues between the characters of the *Memoir* and which involve the reader so deeply. It may seem paradoxical, but I reckon we can surmise that Bion wrote these books for reasons akin to this “commitment to the real”, even if the reality to which he felt committed is neither historical nor material but mental reality, emotional truth, and the “facts” and “actual events” under discussion are far more complex than those that may be observed with one’s eyes. From this starting point in this paper I’ll try to explore Bion’s relationship with narration and literature.

**Key words:** truth, drama, theater, romance, fact

*Q Can you give me an idea what this is about?*

*A Psycho-analysis, I believe*

*Q Are you sure? It looks like a queer affair.*

*A It is a queer affair – like psycho-analysis. You’d have to read it.*

Bion, *A Memoir of the Future, The Dream*

**A memoir, an Enigma**

From whatever perspective it is approached, Bion’s *Memoir* trilogy comes across as something of an enigma. Those who have attempted to parse its riddles vary greatly in their definitions of the work, their explanations sometimes alarmingly different: after discussing the psychoanalytical elements contained in the *Memoir*, in his preface to the first of the three books, Francesco Corrao deems it to be “also a dramaturgical text” (p. xiv); while in her preface to *The Past Presented*, Anna Baruzzi specifies that the text should be “considered a psychoanalytical work” written “in an unusual style”, at once “a stage play, a novel of manners, and a science-fiction novel, dotted with dialogues, monologues, poetical passages, and scientific discourse”; she sees it moreover as a work that defies borders, belonging to that “experimentalism that closes one era and opens another” (pp. xi–xiii). P. C. Sandler (2007) defines the work as a “linguistic theatrical-Socratic elaboration

endowed with Shakespearian-Diderotian-Goethian-Carrollian overtones”, even though it closely *resembles* a theatrical presentation or a novel, which it is not, and goes further, claiming that the trilogy is “the written formulation that approximates itself more to psycho-analysis than any written formulation released before it and until now”, but adds that the trilogy does not possess any “artistic or literary value for its own sake”, even though it has the same uncanny capacity to approach the truth found in many literary and musical works. In her essay entitled “‘Underlying pattern’ in Bion’s *Memoir of the Future*”, Meg Harris Williams (*Bion Today*, 2011), and in her book *Bion’s Dream* (2010) she explores the trilogy from a purely literary angle, considering it to be a pioneering work, in which the author’s self-analysis and inner autobiography overlap with the creation of a new genre of expression of the Self, namely “a reverie *now*”. By this Harris Williams claims that Bion’s *Memoir* is a dream-autobiography, as it were, to be set alongside the author’s “official” autobiographies – *The Long Week-End* (1982), and *All My Sins Remembered* (1985). Meanwhile, in his review of Harris Williams’s book, James Grotstein notes his agreement with her conviction, and adds that these two autobiographies and the *Memoir* together constitute “not simply a myth but an *epic*, not unlike the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*”; through these five texts, claims Grotstein, Bion teaches us that “to the extent that dreaming imparts ever-evolving meanings to the emotional experiences of our lives, the more these experiences become mythic-epic narratives that unite, integrate, contain, and transcend each living moment they process” (p. 467). These, then, are just some of the attempts to pin down the genre of the *Memoir*, as proposed by various authoritative (and fond) readers of Bion’s works. From this array of such highly diverging impressions, it becomes clear that the text eludes classification and shuns all labels. That said, it comes as a consolation to learn that this was the express wish of Bion himself, as evidenced by the declaration he penned to close the last book of the trilogy:

All my life I have been imprisoned, frustrated, dogged by common sense, reason, memories, desires and – greatest bug-bear of all – understanding and being understood. This is an attempt to express my rebellion, to say ‘Good-bye’ to all that. It is my wish, I now realise doomed to failure, to write a book unspoiled by any tincture of common-sense, reason, etc. (see above). So although I would write, ‘Abandon Hope all ye who expect to find any facts – scientific, aesthetic or religious – in this book’, I cannot claim to have succeeded. [...] However successful my attempt, there would always be the risk that the book ‘became’ acceptable, respectable, honoured and unread. ‘Why write then?’ you may ask. To prevent someone who KNOWS from filling the empty space – but I fear I am being ‘reasonable’, that great Ape. Wishing you all a Happy Lunacy and a Relativistic Fission...

(*A Memoir of the Future, Dawn of Oblivion*)

I believe that, ultimately, the *Memoir of the Future* is a conflation of these various definitions, all of them covering some aspects, but none quite achieving a proper

match. What is often forgotten – and which can elude the Italian reader – is that the title itself defines the work’s literary genre: instead of calling his trilogy *Memory of the Future*, Bion has chosen to call it *A Memoir*. The word used for the Italian translation, *memoria*, is more ambiguous and omits the distinction. In English the title alerts the reader as to what is to come – a *memoir* – that is, an account of personal recollections. If we investigate what exactly a memoir is as a literary genre, the paradox merely gets deeper. For instance, G. Thomas Couser has devoted several publications to defining the genre, starting with his *Memoir: An Introduction* (2011), in which he expounds on the differences between novel and autobiography, identifying one of the distinctive traits of the memoir as a “commitment to the real”, and adds that such a genre indicates the fundamental human activity of narrating our life story on its own terms.

Just what constitutes reality and truth, and what might right be considered “facts”, is one of the chief arguments that underpin the dialogues between the characters of the *Memoir* and which involve the reader so deeply. It may seem paradoxical, but I reckon we can surmise that Bion wrote these books for reasons akin to this “commitment to the real”, even if the reality to which he felt committed is neither historical nor material but mental reality, emotional truth, and the “facts” and “actual events” under discussion are far more complex than those that may be observed with one’s eyes. Bion is faithful to this mental reality, and rigorously so: for this reason he abandoned logic, memory and desire, and in these three volumes gave voice to the multicoloured variety of characters harboured in his Self, a panoply of individuals ranging from the highly evolved to the ordinary, the transgressive to the mystical, and even the more primitive, the rejects and outcasts.

### **A proper mental diet**

The narrative style matches the challenge of this commitment, multiplying itself in the infinite nuances of mental reality; the language follows suit, with its wealth of neologisms and quirky invented terms.

The language and style offer another salient feature of the dialogues between the various characters of the *Memoir*. Keenly aware of the lurking “Satanic Jargonier” Bion took great pains to avoid its pitfalls [the pitfalls of psychobabble], and to my mind the *Memoir* is Bion’s utmost exertion in this directions, a means to narrate his inner life in terms most suited to his disposition, to speak with his own voice – or better, with his own *voices*.

In the second book the character known as P.A., that is the Psycho-Analyst (who frequently expresses the view of the author/Bion himself), declares this war on jargon as the reason for his recourse to fiction:

P.A. I am no poet, but I succumbed to the temptation to compose a patriotic anthem, almost a New World symphony, using the theme – ‘borrowed’ of course without acknowledgement – ‘My Mind to Me A Kingdom Is.

ROLAND How very apposite. Just right for the psycho-analyst!

P.A. Alas, no.

ROLAND & ROBIN Really? How was that?

P.A. His Satanic Jargonier took offence; on some pretence that psycho-analytic jargon was being eroded by eruptions of clarity. I was compelled to seek asylum in fiction. Disguised as fiction, the truth occasionally slipped through.

*(A Memoir of the Future, The Past Presented)*

Reading this passage I recalled the poetic words that Thomas Ogden devoted to the role of the voice in psychoanalysis: in the third chapter of his *Conversations at the Frontier of Dreaming* (2001) Ogden explains the difficulty of speaking with one's own voice, a voice which, while changing according to the context and listener, remains individual and unique. This uniqueness and individuality is by no means easy to achieve, and at times helping the analysand to speak with his/her own voice can be the outcome of the analysis. When re-reading those pages with Bion's work in mind I found myself thinking that Ogden's *Conversations* offer such an apt description of the contents of Bion's *Memoir* that it is surprising that the trilogy is nowhere mentioned in Ogden's essay, nor in his other main works. And yet so often while reading the *Memoir* this author came to mind, not only because Ogden is certainly one of the most brilliant contemporary analysts to have creatively developed Bion's ideas, but most of all because he is the most literary.

In his recent book on creative reading, Ogden himself demonstrates how a text can provide a starting point from which each reader draws his/her personal baggage of meanings and ideas. While this is true for any book, the fecund ambiguities inherent to *Memoir of the Future* and its dialogic – and elusive – style allow ample margin for an exponential multiplication of meanings and readings. What I am inquiring into with regard to the trilogy and its author is the rapport between art or literature, and psychoanalysis, a rapport central to the very nature of the *Memoir* but also to its contents. Because, while it is true that Bion's trilogy may be termed a literary/artistic work of psychoanalysis, it is nonetheless clear that the model of rapport between analysis and art on which it hinges (or defines) is not the classic retrospective historical study, nor interpretation of the events involving the narrative's characters according to psychoanalytical theory – that is, the “application” of analysis to literature. What happens here is effectively the opposite: literature is being applied to psychoanalysis. As we have seen, here psychoanalysis “finds refuge”, the power of literary fiction defends it from the pitfalls of jargon, and allows truth to establish a foothold.

In his trilogy, Bion presents himself to the reader as being a reader himself, a literary omnivore with a vast appetite, devouring the likes of Shakespeare and Blake, Joyce and Pound, Milton and Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Browning, Tennyson and Hopkins, Rimbaud and Conan Doyle, and not least Lewis Carroll.

For Bion, it is vital that reading and literature form part of our daily “mental diet”. The characters and goings-on in the novels we love come to inhabit our interior world, and for Bion they are therefore vividly “real” elements in our mental makeup. Thus, his *Memoir of the Future* is populated with characters from his favourite works

of fiction, who dialogue and interact with “Myself”, Bion’s alter ego, P.A., and with the other players featured in the work, such as Alice, Rosemary, Roland, Robin, and so on.

Bion and Myself engage in a series of conversations that are at once witty and serious with such fictional figures as Sherlock Holmes, Watson, and Mycroft, debating on their nature, whether they are real or not, but also speculating on their usefulness in aiding the reader’s mental health:

BION But, my good man, are you not aware that you are entirely fictitious characters? I am a qualified doctor!

[...]

WATSON (*contains his mirth with difficulty, but manages to be civil*) Excuse me, sire, but I must admit that I have never heard of your existence. I do not want to hurt your feelings or to appear to boast, but although Mycroft has always been of a retiring disposition, Sherlock, and to a lesser extent myself, has a world-wide following. You yourself were admitting that there are imaginary characters who are infinitely better known than countless generations of nonentities. Now excuse me. I am a very busy man – allow me to suggest that you get on that couch there and sleep it off quietly.

[...]

MYCROFT I think you are ‘murdering’ it if I want to emphasis *your* crime. Just because I shall still be entertaining long after you have disappeared, you have no hesitation in calling Sherlock and Watson and me imaginary characters and claiming a superior status for yourself and your bloody books.

MYSELF Oh no, I don’t. Excuse me; but you have got me mixed up with Bion; and what about the blood you have just detected on my books?

MYCROFT Don’t you acknowledge any responsibility for your books? Or do you disclaim your brain children?

[...]

MYSELF I should have thought that during the course of your sojourn in my mind – if that’s where it and you have been – you would have become transformed from a relatively minor, fictitious character into a somewhat major part of your more useful characteristics. If there were such a thing as a mental digestive system, I could say that the mental diet of entertaining fictitious characters has contributed greatly to my mental health.

(*A Memoir of the Future, The Dream*)

But our mental health does not rely solely on entertainment; we *enjoy* art because it moves us, it makes us feel in unison, and thereby transforms us. As Bion notes, if the performances of a play by Shakespeare is “an experience which is emotionally stirring; it effects a change – In Wilfred R. Bion – that is durable” (*A Memoir of the Future, The Dream*). In the closing pages of the *Dawn of Oblivion*, the character P.A. relates a dire period of self-questioning that was catastrophic for his professional

career: he was no longer confident about the interpretations he had made until then, and now seriously doubted his judgement. At this point he turned to literature, which turned out to be his salvation: “it was as if, literally as metaphorically, light began to grow, night was replaced by dawn. I was aware, with a new comprehension, of the passage of Milton’s invocation to light at the commencement of the Third Book of *Paradise Lost*” (*A Memoir of the Future, Dawn of Oblivion*).

### **Darkness and Fiction**

One can surmise that the crisis related by Bion’s character P.A. is the one he himself traversed in the early 1970s, and which prompted him to leave London and move to Los Angeles. This is the period in which traces of mysticism begin to creep into Bion’s writings and he starts talking of ‘O’, “the unknown, unknowable, ‘formless infinite’”, of the kind that had never cropped up in writings on psychoanalysis before then. It is this part of his output that is usually referred to as “late Bion”, and which begin with *Attention and Interpretation* (1970) and culminates with *A Memoir of the Future*. The creative instance of the trilogy therefore coincides with the author’s existential impasse, and we might see this output as an attempt to articulate this state, to relate and reason it through. As such, these writings offer a kind of salvific outlet for Bion, a subjective and personal purpose, as with all narratives.

Regarding the clinical and theoretical utility of the said Late Bion works, there is still much debate. In 2011 the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* devoted an ample section to the ongoing controversy, which arose in response to the noted article by Edna O’Shaughnessy, “Whose Bion?” (2005), in which the author claims the theoretical continuity of Bion’s early writings with the work of Melanie Klein, and acknowledges them as the only ones having scientific validity. To her mind, Bion is not the “revolutionary genius” touted by those who lay such store in his writings (Ferro 2005; Tabak de Biankedi 2005; Symington and Symington 1996; Eigen 1998; Grotstein 1981; Sandler 2005; Vermote 2011), but one who fell prey to the lure of the paradox, and lost sight of the boundaries by making “the texts too open, too pro- and e-vocative, and weakened by riddling meanings” (p. 1525).

Bion found himself at odds with the orthodox Klein set in London, who shrank from the novelties of his own writings, which can be grasped only if read or heard with other eyes and ears. The cast of *The Past Presented* converse about music and the instruments the enable us to hear it.

Certainly, to digest Bion’s later works, in order to grasp the music beyond the noise one must yield to the allure of the paradoxes and savour the richness of the text, and ignore the weaknesses of the said “riddled meanings”. At any event, this is what the author intended: to be “deliberately” and “precisely” obscure (*The Past Presented*, p. 189). For Bion, therefore, ambiguity is a goal, a mission. It almost seems that he devotes himself to seeking ambiguity with the same passionate dedication as his quest for truth, or that they stand for the same thing. As noted by Civitarese (2011, 36), Bion picks his terms according to their “quotient of ambiguity”: “most of Bion’s concepts can be ordered in terms of a light/dark binary, or of insight/blindness. Take for instance his notions of ‘reverse perspective’, ‘vertex’, or ‘binocular vision’; his

idea of truth as *phós* (Gk., light), and the darkness as a negative force; the unsaturated mind; preconception; the invisibility of total or transcendental reality. The same words Bion uses might equally apply to a sceptic's frantic fumbling: conjecture, hypothesis, speculative imagination, uncertainty, supposition, doubt, wandering/roaming/rambling, and so on." Because, it is only through blinding oneself with a "beam of intense darkness" (Grotstein 2007) that one can get closer to 'O'; the truth may be reached only through falsification.

For Bion, the quest for truth is also an ethical imperative, perhaps the only moral aspect on which he clearly pronounces himself. In this he presupposes a certain fellowship with his reader, which he declares outspokenly in a note in *The Past Presented*, whereby Alice, Rosemary, Roland, Robin, and P.A. discuss truth, lies, science, and art, and in a note Bion inserts: "Artistic: Whether a scientist, a painter, composer, the person to whom this book is addressed is assumed to be driven by an urge to the truth. I cannot conceive of a drive to untruth as being separable from what is evil".

If, as mentioned above, literary fiction "filters" the truth, enabling it to come to the surface, *A Memoir of the Future* is the work of Bion's that is most pellucidly dedicated to the quest for truth, because it is openly declared to be "fiction". It is when truth is deemed absolute that it becomes dangerous – and this often occurs in analysis, Bion warns:

P.A. Allow me to conduct you round the cages of my psycho-analytic zoo. Of course the names are somewhat forbidding, but the creatures themselves are beautiful and ugly. Ah! Here is Absolute Truth – a most ferocious animal which has killed more innocent white lies and black wholes than you would think possible.

ROLAND You muddle it with your puns.

ROBIN Call it paronomasia – more scientific.

ALICE It sounds like a very attractive flower.

P.A. Only a flower of speech.

(*A Memoir of the Future, The Past Presented*)

The truth Bion cleaves to and searches with such exacting commitment is the opposite to this "ferocious animal" inhabiting his "psychoanalytic zoo": the emotional and personal truth is a "truth of fiction" that sits more comfortably in narrative than in psychoanalytical theory. The conversion to fiction, Grotstein avers, is a step both requisite and fundamental to the individual: "The 'true thinker' must seek the truth, though in vain, only being able to approach it obliquely or tangentially because of its 'blinding glare'" (Grotstein 2007, 149). Such "well-wishing falsehoods" are those that govern our dreaming and primary processes. To dream reality, to digest it, entails making it personal and emotive, incarnate. "Thinking is bearable because of its sensuous component" (*A Memoir of the Future, The Dream*), affirms wisely the Man in his dialogue with Bion. Passion, it turns out, is a fundamental element of thinking to keep it alive, but to do this another mind is

needed:

BION Most people experience mental death if they live long enough. You don't have to live long to have that experience – all you have to do is to be mentally alive.

ALICE [...] You have to have a partner for one thing – even in opposition  
(*A Memoir of the Future, The Dream*)

The dramatic/dialogic structure of *Memoir of the Future* showcases the sheer mental vitality of Bion, but also reveals his urge to find “a partner, even an opponent” to appeal to, another person to assist him in his thinking, because only thus can the mental life truly come alive. This putative partner may be the reader even, who may detect through the discourse a living interlocutor (or better, several) capable of helping him or her think.

While on the one hand it is vital that readers who accept to immerse themselves in these texts must in some way be attracted to the same siren's call, the same appetite for ambiguity that spurred the author, on the other hand the problem of deciphering the texts remains for all: Bion manages to be now playful, stimulating, and gladly irreverent, but also abstruse, unfathomable, and exasperating. So, one might ask, how should Bion be read? Fortunately, an attempt to answer this question has been made by Thomas H. Ogden, whose own writing is contrastingly of great natural clarity and ease of style. His article entitled “An introduction to the reading of Bion” (2003), Ogden describes Bion's *Learning from Experience* (1962) as following along the lines of *Alice in Wonderland*, and then proceeds to the later works, observing that the reader needs to be armed with all his negative capability, to be open-minded and welcome whatever emerges, ready for the unexpected, to no rush to interpret the text, but instead wait as the “actual events” manifest themselves in the text. In *Attention and Interpretation* (1970) Bion compares his reader to the psychoanalyst: “the reader must disregard what I say until the O of the experience of reading has evolved to a point where the actual events of reading issue in his interpretation of the experiences. Too great a regard for what I have written obstructs the process I represent by the terms ‘he becomes the O that is common to himself and myself’”.

Curiously, once again Ogden does not include *A Memoir of the Future* in his essay on reading Bion, yet his advice seems to me particularly apt for approaching these texts.

## Exit to

To my mind Meg Harris Williams's definition of Bion's texts as “a reverie *now*” is strikingly appropriate because it comprises all the actors employed in the experience of reading. As we said, the three books have a dreamlike quality, written in the language of dreams, and the author's capacity of reverie is what he has created through maieutics and is a unique substance. To my mind, in *Memoir* Bion has gone further: it seems to me that these books offer their reverie to the reader, easing him through any aesthetic conflict arising from the experience of reading [them]. All

three books both seduce and alarm the reader with their impenetrable and unnerving style that eschews mollifying the reader with the weapons of rational knowledge or common sense: like the child that delights in the body of its mother, the reader of *Memoir* also has a “dubious experience” and can be compared to someone who has “come into a strange country where he knows neither the language nor the customary non-verbal cues and communications” (Meltzer and Harris Williams 1989, 41). In order to break out of this dubious experience he must meet the gaze of its mother who absorbs and transforms its anxiety, and supplies the child with other indicators for facing the unknown experience without rushing to make it known too soon; someone who supplies the child with its alpha function so that it can develop a “function of creative imagination”: she is the partner necessary partner for becoming “mentally alive”, as Alice observes. It is true that often enough one loses one’s way in these texts, but Bion does not leave his reader alone: he supplies (albeit sometimes hidden) clues and indications that provide the reader with bearings for navigating the unknown world. By this I mean the nearly constant presence of a figure among the various viewpoints put forward by the speakers who voices scepticism and appeals to common sense, or doubts, or the fragility of the characters, with whom it is easy to identify, but also to the notes and scattered “stage directions” inserted in brackets, as with a play script.

What is most striking, however, is the appearance in such a complex text of notes that offer extremely concise and precise definitions of concepts that are otherwise barely decipherable, whose explanation elsewhere might occupy considerable space in his theoretical writings. The notes introduce a viewpoint that might be considered “external” to the dialogues under way, and which help the reader find his bearings and offer the occasional summary. Take, for instance, the concept of the “beta element” described so directly in one such note: “Beta Element: as a convenient method of referring to something which may exist; not a thought, but that might become what thinkers would describe as a thought, e.g. if a dog comes when it is called” (*The Past Presented*, ch. 3 no. 14).

Among the “stage directions” he uses, one in particular that comes to mind the way Bion closes the monologue of Myself (*The Dream*, ch. 13, p. 57), who, after getting ensnared in a tangle of ideas on the power of the mind and its revelations, decides to turn in: “Time to I went to sleep. Excuse me...(Exit to  $\alpha$ )”. It is almost as if Bion is asking the reader for help to proceed in the said direction, toward this  $\alpha$ : “something which is not, and is not like, but is becoming”, as he defines in a note when the character Alpha looms into view.

Certainly, while such directions usher the reader along a somewhat tortuous and inaccessible trail that is barred to anyone expecting straightforward answers or a well-beaten track, the same route offers new panoramas and revelations to those willing to apply their patience: “Exit to  $\alpha$ ” sounds like the kind of direction Carroll’s young Alice might come across on the way through Wonderland, like when she encounters the Cheshire Cat:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.  
“I don't much care where—” said Alice.  
“Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” said the Cat.  
“...so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.  
“Oh, you're sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”  
(Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ch. VI)

Another tool Bion adopts to provide bearings for his reader throughout the trilogy is the hyperbolic use of quotations, by means of which the author sets his reader in the glad company of many a popular figure, creating an oasis of familiarity as it were, making the reader feel at home and free to roam among the many beloved characters he has conjured up, and offering comfort even in this “back-to-front world” of his. I wish to end these reflections by taking Bion's lead in evoking a beloved author, whose verses seem to me to echo in the pages of *A Memoir of the Future*. After ploughing my way through Bion's lyrical adventure, I like to imagine Bion the clinician as an analyst with a bent for fiction, a figure of that kind that W.H. Auden evokes in these verses:

### *The Novelist*

Encased in talent like a uniform,  
The rank of every poet is well known;  
They can amaze us like a thunderstorm,  
Or die so young, or live for years alone.  
They can dash forward like hussars: but he  
Must struggle out of his boyish gift and learn  
How to be plain and awkward, how to be  
One after whom none think it worth to turn.

For, to achieve his lightest wish, he must  
Become the whole of boredom, subject to  
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,  
And in his own weak person, if he can,  
Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.

(W.H. Auden, 1940)

One might conclude from this reading that perhaps the analyst likewise ought to give berth to the novelist lurking within him as a means of helping the patient discover his own bent for fiction. In this way the patient can give voice to the throng of characters that will emerge in the course of that analytical adventure.

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