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## THE LABYRINTH OF TRANSLATING POETRY: THE CASE OF THE TRANSLATOR'S SELF IN DARWĪSH'S 'IN THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE'

**Abstract:** *The pervasiveness of poetry in most cultures is crystal-clear. Connoisseurs of poetry in the Arab World, for instance usually enjoy a higher status in society. The paramount importance of poetry in cultures necessitates meticulous attention to the transference from one language into another. Many translation theorists and practitioners take cognisance of the labyrinth of translating poetry. The present article aims to touch on the dilemma of the translation of the 'self' in Sinan Antoon's translation of Maḥmūd Darwīsh's masterpiece (2011) "In the Presence of Absence". A potpourri of examples is analysed demonstrating the subdued presence of the translator's self and the impact this exerts on the translation of some allusions, and the determination of the meaning of specific ambiguous signifiers (i.e. words, phrases and sentences). The findings show that Antoon's translation is a rip-off of the apex of Darwīsh's creativity.*

**Key words:** *'Self' translation; Darwīsh; Antoon; literary translation; allusion.*

"A successful translator is the one who imbibes the emotional and sentimental vehemence of the poem, and s/he thereupon can pour out this sap into the target language" (Tuqan, 1993, 58).

### Introduction

It is much of incontrovertible evidence that translation has played a crucial role in intercultural exchange since time immemorial. Throughout history, it is oft-truism that many cultures have been given a new lease on life by virtue of

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translation. Mouakket (1988: 25) claims that “the Arabs owed the Greeks the initiative and the starting point towards reasoning. But no sooner had they taken the first step, than their vigorous and earnest desire for knowledge surpassed that of Greeks in many fields”. And, the “subsequent translation [...] from Arabic into Latin during the high medieval centuries” (Burke and Hsia 2007: 1) is also self-evident. Kelly (quoted in Hermans 1999: 37) points out that Western Europe “owes its civilisation to translators”. Yet, it is believed that the translation from one language (usually referred to as Source Language (SL)) into another (usually referred to as Target Language (TL)) is replete with many difficulties. These have become even more evident especially when it comes to the translation between unrelated languages as is the case with Arabic and English; whilst the former belongs to a Semitic language family, the latter is akin to Indo-European languages. True, the two languages have little linguistic and cultural affinity.

The present article examines the dilemma of translating the ‘self’ in Sinan Antoon’s translation of Maḥmūd Darwīsh’s (2011) “In the Presence of Absence” (2011). As a point of departure, it is perhaps useful to look at the histo-political context as can be manifested in the Palestinian and Israel conflict. The conflict started in 1948. A Jewish state (Israel) was established in the aftermath of 1948 war between Arab countries and Israel. It ensues, therefore, that the war degenerated into a bloodbath of Palestinians killing, perhaps in one of the most painful holocaust ever known in history. Hundreds of thousands were driven out of their homeland and became refugees in neighbouring countries, with echoes of horrendous experience to date, among whom was Maḥmūd Darwīsh, a Palestinian poet of indomitable will ever known so far in the Arab World in contemporary literature. He wrote a collection of poems in various recondite areas of knowledge covering the more global existential questions and human nature, and specifically the political conundrum of the existence of Palestinian incessant sufferings since 1948. These poems probably continue to be an inspiration for many years to come by virtue of their indelible impression on an audience of readers both in Arabic and different translations in many languages. Exquisitely, Maḥmūd Darwīsh’s friend and poet Fadwa Tuḡan theoretically ciphers the pursuit of the translator who yearns for and endeavours to render the

idiosyncratic Palestinian literature in general and Palestinian poetry in particular. It seems that Antoon has gone through in that mission, won the 2012 National Award and received plaudits from crowds and critics all around the world. However, Darwīsh's work represents an arcane literary masterpiece with an eristic form and content (Thaqafi 2007: 4). 'In presence of Absence' is glutted with Darwīsh's subjectivity, which is aesthetically crafted throughout the various layers of meaning accrued from his own considerable experience of a poet forced into exile for decades as a corollary of Israeli occupation to Palestine in 1948; on the other shore, Antoon, the novelist, poet and translator has highlighted that he was before a *sui generis* mosaic of an autobiography and poetography clad with an amalgam of prose and poetry (Darwīsh 2011: 5). Nevertheless, has Antoon been versed enough to ensure that his translation was an act of creative writing minus his self? Has the astuteness to suppress his poetic self from being invoked to provide an 'Antoonean' reading to the text? Has he been able to maintain Darwīsh's style, language and allusions, which had been originally devised in the source text? These questions and many others can be invoked after reading such a creative translation of such a remarkable "text." Now scalpels are in place and chapters I, XII and XIX have been randomly selected to draw from some samples for dissection.

It is perhaps worth pointing that language goes far beyond a mere means of communication in daily intercultural exchange. In the words of Newmark (1988: 42), language "is designed to please the senses, firstly through its actual or imagined sound, and secondly through its metaphors. The rhythm, balance and contrasts of sentences, clauses and words also play their part. The sound-effects consist of onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, metre, intonation, stress - some of these play a part in most types of texts: in poetry."

In terms of translation, the basic assumption would be that translating from one language into another might be easy. In this regard, Tytler (1790, 7) claims that: "If the genius and character of all languages were the same, it would be an easy task to translate from one into another; nor would anything more be requisite on the part of the translator, than fidelity and attention." But, Tytler adds "as the genius and character of languages is confessedly very different, it has sense become a common opinion, that it is the duty of a translator to attend only the sense

and spirit of his original, to make himself perfectly master of his author's ideas, and to communicate them in those expressions which he judges to be best suited to convey them" (ibid.).

### **Equivalence**

Translation is viewed as transference of meanings across languages. This implies capturing two layers of meanings: on denotative and connotative levels. This also implicates seeking equivalents at the two levels. It is not sufficient to capture only denotative meanings, but also connotative ones as well. With reference to equivalence, it is considered to be as a key issue in translation and translation is "generally viewed as the process of establishing equivalence between the [...] (SL) and [...] (TL) text" (Farghal 1995: 54). Nevertheless, there is a consensus amongst translation theorists and practitioners that equivalence is too far-fetched as languages cut linguistic and cultural realities quite differently. By way of illustration, the Arabic proverbs *'uṣfūrun fil yadi khayrun min 'asharatin 'ala ash-shajarah* (lit. 'a bird in the hand is worth ten in the bush') and *qiṭṭa bi-sab'at arāh* (lit. 'a cat with seven lives') can be translated into their English equivalents: 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' and 'a cat with nine lives' respectively. In such a case, 'two' substitutes for 'ten' and 'nine' substitutes for 'seven' as cultural equivalents in English.

### **Translatability of Poetry**

On the translatability of poetry, Al-Azzam (2005: 62) argues that beyond the widely linguistic constraints, "the translator should understand and live the mentality and thinking of the source text writer and audience, on the one hand, and that of the target text readers, on the other." Therefore, Haywood (1971: ix) is inclined to conclude that "[p]oetry should not be translated as prose: this is a certain road to boring the reader. So, verse should be translated in verse, almost invariably with rhyme." By the same token, Tytler (1790: 107) makes a fairly obvious claim that "[t]here are certain species of poetry, of which the chief merit consists in the sweetness and melody of the versification. Of these it is evident, that the very essence must perish in translating them into prose." Tytler (ibid.: 108; emphasis in original) further explains:

But it is not only by the measure that poetry is distinguishable from prose. It is by the character of its thoughts and sentiments, and by the nature of that language in which they are clothed. A boldness of figures, a luxuriance of imagery, A frequent use of metaphors, a quickness of transition, a liberty of digressing; all these are not *allowable* in poetry, but to many species of it, *essential*, but they are quite unsuitable to the character of prose.

At this juncture, an approach towards literal translation may be appropriate insofar as poetry translation is concerned. Abbasi and Manafi as cited in Tina (2013: 12) speak of literal versus free translation strategies. The former includes “phonemic translation, stanza imitation, meter imitation, imitation of the rhyme scheme, and literal blank verse translation in which the poetry translator attempts to give the literal translation of the content of the [source text] in blank verse without being confined to the rhyming pattern of the [source text]. The latter, however, includes “rhymed translation, blank verse translation, and interpretation” (ibid).

### **Lost allusions**

In literary translation, preserving rhetorical devices (e.g. repetition, wordplay, alliteration, allusion etc.), normally aesthetically employed by text producer, turns out to be extremely difficult. “Within the context of intertextuality, allusions participate in the creation of a network of tissues between texts. Some allusions are very popular and occur in several texts; they travel between texts and every time they are borrowed, they gain new meanings within the intertextual space” (Alawi 2010: 2444). Irwin (2002: 521) offers a working definition for allusion as a reference which is “indirect in the sense that it calls for associations which go beyond mere substitution of a referent. Allusions typically draw on information not readily available to every member of a cultural and linguistic community, are typically but not necessarily brief, and may or may not be literary in nature.” In the words of Leppihalme (1997: 3), allusion refers “to a variety of uses of performed linguistic material in either its original or modified form, and of proper names, to convey often implicit meaning.” Leppihalme sees that “a culture bump occurs when an individual finds himself or herself in different, strange, or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture” (ibid.: 4).

With particular reference to translating a religious allusion to one episode of the story of Joseph and the Lord's wife in Darwīsh's *In the Presence of Absence*, Halabi (2015: 34) claims that:

The whole religious allusion refers to the early phase of [Darwīsh's] poetry representing innocence and lack of awareness; besides, it manifests an incident in the Book of Genesis where Adam and Eve gathered to eat from the forbidden tree. This unnamed fruit grown in the Garden of Eden has become an apple under the influence of the 'golden apples' in the Garden of Hesperides; afterwards, the apple becomes a symbol of knowledge, temptation, immortality and the sin of man and his fall from the Garden of Eden. [Darwīsh] tends to reflect the symbolism of apple in his own life and his keenness to be mature and knowledgeable after being naïve and innocent, yet the reader of the [target text] won't be able to recogni[s]e at first sight that there is a religious allusion to the Quran and the Bible; s/he will deal with the text as an ordinary story without linking it to any previous text; thus, it is the task of the translator to add an explanatory foot-note to guide the readers to the aim and goal of conjuring up such sequential series of images and events.

## **Methodology**

### *Significance of the study*

Literary translation is not an embryonic academic discipline in the Arab World. Translating poetry, in particular, has gained momentum and weight as can be seen in Arab studies on translating poetry (see Haywood 1971; Mouakket 1988; Hassan 2008; Dwikat A. *et al.* 2001; Sha'ir 2015, among many others). Nevertheless, studies on Arabic poetry in relation to the translation of 'self' are rare. The present paper is intended to shed new light on the translation of 'self', and in so doing delineate a path for further research in Arabic and other languages. Hopefully, this paper will increase the Arab translators' awareness of aspects beyond linguistic realisations, and it offers an insight into translating 'self' as illustrated in the translations mainly taken from the English Antoon's translation (2011) and on occasion from Shaheen's translation 2010.

Our first data sample starts just a few lines after the onset whereby the translator blurs a foregrounding allusion as can illustrated in Example 1 below:

Example 1

Original: “*wa ‘ad‘ūhum ‘lā ‘ixtiṣāril-wadā‘i wal-inṣirāfi ilā ‘ashā‘in ihtifālyyin yalīqu bidhikrāk*” (Darwīsh 2009: 9).

Translation: “and to call on them to hasten their farewell and go on to a banquet befitting your memory” (Antoon’s translation 2011: 15).

The lexicon “banquet” does lend itself to a straightforward translation, i.e. it does not entail the meaning of “supper”, thus it does not conjure the allusion of the ‘Last Supper’. However, the premeditated choice of the highlighted Arabic word ‘*ashā‘in*’ (lit. ‘supper’), which means supper or dinner used to refer to a funerary feast, is but a marked use in the Palestinian cultural context where a funerary feast is a lunch and for sure not a dinner (Traditions and Costumes Burden the Deceased’s Family, 2014). As a result, to translate ‘*ashā‘in*’ (lit. ‘supper’) into “banquet” might be a deliberate or un-deliberate step to evacuate the text of its Sufi marrow. In the ‘Last Supper’, obviously associated with heavy connotative values, e.g. ‘the Holy Grail’, ‘Holy communion’, Jesus the Nazareth has symbolically given the bread and wine as his body and blood to sum up the whole Christian philosophy of transfiguration and sacrifice. This allusion echoes resonantly in the source text, and it could have been seamlessly traced in English if ‘*ashā‘in*’ (lit. ‘supper’) had been translated into “supper” so as to trumpet that inseparability between Darwīsh (the poet) and his literary corpus, which represents no less than his body and blood, passing them on to his readers to quench and be sated with the intellectual thirst.

Antoon’s domesticating and simplifying eyes persist to tune down the profundity of the text in the translation which is an ultra-simplified reading for the line as can be further shown in Example 2 below:

Example 2

Original: “*wa qad **kharajat** minī wa **kharajat** minī sāliman fal ta’dhan lī bi’an ‘arāka*” (Darwīsh 2009: 9).

Translation: “allow me to see you, now that you have **left** me and I have **left** you, safe and sound” (Antoon’s translation 2011: 15).

Translation: “allow me to see you, as I **begot** you and you **begot** me in peace” (Shaheen’s translation 2010: 3).

Such a translation gives the reader a direct implication that the Darwīsh's soul has left his physicality and vice versa, which is no more than a stereotypical image of body-soul convergence. This translation stereotypically fits especially in such funerary context. However, a subtle furtive glance over the Arabic elusive word *kharajat* (lit. 'leave me') can easily be sufficient to trumpet that "left" is a reductionist reading of the word. The word "leave [left in past] has 22 homogeneous senses (The New Lexicon: Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1988; Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1978); none of them conveys the meaning of "emergence and birth" which can be derived from the Arabic word *kharaja* (lit. 'to leave'). Various evidences in the Quran which represents an inexhaustible source and reference for many of Darwīsh's allusions, demonstrate the much profound sense of the verb *kharaja* (lit. 'left'); for example, Surat Al-Rum verse 19 where the word *yakhruj* (lit. 'to leave') is usually translated in the sense of "bringing out", which means "to produce, to cause to be seen, etc." (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1978). Moreover, Mohammad Shaheen's translation of the same text, which was carried out in consultation with Darwīsh himself, has rendered the same line differently (Sha'ir 2015). Such a translation conveys the reciprocal birth between Darwīsh's and his subjectivity manifested in his huge literary corpus. Paradoxically, Antoon's choice to translate *kharaja* (lit. 'left') into "left" simplifies the line and adds different meaning to the text.

Another manifestation of the simplification and domestication of the text appears in the translation of the pronouns. The intricate use of pronouns in all of Darwīsh's poetry cannot be fattened by the English formality of 'you before you' whereby 'you' may mean 'I' and 'I' may mean 'you'; especially, when we see that the arrangement of 'you and I' in the original text varies to refer to the various layers of Darwīsh's totality. For illustration, in the first chapter, Darwīsh says *linadhdhhabana ma'an 'ana wa'anta fi masārayn* (lit. "to go together I and you" and not 'you and I') in which the domesticated choice selected by Antoon suppresses the subjective self of the original text by forcing the domestication and English formalities down its throat. Darwīsh himself has highlighted his deliberate heterogeneous manipulation and arrangement of pronouns as a way to fathom his essence (Darwīsh, 1975: 5). Furthermore, several other



literary analysts have tackled the criticality of Darwīsh's conscious and subliminal use of pronouns in his other poems; mainly the Mural (Barghouthy, Khader, Mohammad, and Zaqtan, 1999: 19; Dwikat, A., Dwikat, J., Dwikat, M., Hewri and Saadeh, 2001). The same can be applied to the use of pronouns in this intricate text which after all is nothing, but another transfiguration and manifestation of Darwīsh's Self. Therefore, it is not acceptable to subject a literary subjective text to the clichés of English formalities. For example, the pronouns 'you and I' are mentioned thrice in the first chapter; twice in the arrangement of 'I and you' and once as 'you and I' (Darwīsh, 2009: 9-11); nonetheless, Antoon has chosen to domesticate the use of pronouns, translating them all into the frozen arrangement of 'you and I' (Darwīsh, 2011: 15-17). Being the case so, he subjects the unique and free individual subjectivity to the triteness of English formalities, and deals with a literary text as if it were an academic piece of writing.

### **Balance between the majesty and naturalness**

Straightforwardly, this section is designated to discuss Antoon's translation in light of its ability to strike a balance between the enthralling seamless eloquence of a text that has been deemed to be the apogee of Darwīsh's genius by both translators of the text (Darwīsh 2010: x; Darwīsh 2011: 5). Objectively, Antoon attempted to maintain seamlessness of the source text; however, arguably he sacrificed some of the aesthetic values of Darwīsh's language, namely the fact that Antoon has made it crystal clear that one of the reasons behind this text was to "to give the beauty of Arabic prose its maximum potential... I was interested in celebrating language and making it dance, as if I were working in a festival of words, images, and aesthetics, liberated from any other consideration. I wanted to free the demons, doves, and birds of Arabic;" thus he was fully aware that it was meant to be Arabic; therefore, Antoon should have been more foreigniser than a domesticator, words were also meant to be worthy of the linguistic celebration Darwīsh wanted. For more illustration, let us return to the very beginning and pass an eye over Example 3 below:

### Example 3

Original: *wakama 'awṣaytanī 'aqifu alāna bi'ismka kay 'shkura mushayy'ika 'ilā hadhā as-safaril'akhīr wa'ad'ūhum 'ila ikhtiṣār-l-wadā' wal inṣirāfi 'ilā 'ashā'in ihtifālyyi yalīqu bidhkrāk* (Darwīsh 2009: 11).

Translation: Just as you asked me, I stand now in your name to thank those who have come to bid you **farewell** before this final journey and to call on them to hasten their **farewell** and go on to a banquet befitting your memory (Antoon's translation (2011: 15).

As can be seen in Example 3 above, the English equivalent includes a repetition, whereas the source does not, despite the fact that Arabic does entertain repetition. Moreover, the Shaheen's translation of the text (i.e. the translation that was edited in light of Darwīsh's comments and reflections on it) opts to vary regardless the weakness of the choice he opts to use. Here is another example demonstrates a translational practice, namely the addition which made the translation more prosaic:

### Example 4

Original: *fala tasxar min nafsik 'in kunta 'ājizan 'an-l-burhān* (Darwīsh 2009: 13)

Translation: Do not ridicule yourself if you are incapable of **providing** proof (Antoon's translation 2011: 19).

Antoon has opted for the strategy of addition in which he added 'providing' although the source text does not include it; and the expression 'incapable of proof' is a common noun phrase in English; nonetheless, the unnecessary addition of 'providing' weakens the English translation and adds to it a markedness that cannot be traced in the source text.

Now a leap to the twelfth and nineteenth chapters is needed to draw some examples of how the translator has sacrificed some of the semantic components of the source text to safeguard the naturalness and simplicity of the text. Consider Example 5 below:

Example 5

Original: “*watghfū ghayra ābihin bishu’ā’in ytalaṣaṣ ‘alayka mina in-nāfidhati wa ghayra ābihin **biṣxabi** ashshāri*” (Darwīsh 2009: 104).

Translation: “You doze off unaware of a ray of light spying on you, or of the **noise** from the street” (Antoon’s translation (2011: 94).

The translation of the word *ṣxabi* (lit. ‘my noise’) into noise represents a shift in the register of language, for instance, he could have utilised the word “tumult” to maintain the same register. To elaborate on the point, take Example 6 below:

Example 6

Original: “*lā ḍajar fī in-nawm walā khaṭar*” (Darwīsh 2009: 105).

Translation: “there is no boredom or danger in sleep” (Antoon’s translation (2011: 95).

Antoon could have translated it into “sleep entails neither dangerousness nor monotonousness”; however, if he had done so, the text would have been less natural, yet more celebratory. Sacrifices for the sake of naturalness can easily be pointed out in chapter XIX. Take Example 7 below:

Example 7

Original: “*musajā ‘amāmī bilā **ḍajjī***” (Darwīsh 2009: 165).

Translation: “You are stretched out **peacefully** before me” (Antoon’s translation (2011: 148).

Literally, *bilā ḍajjī* (lit. ‘without noise’) means without noise or placidly; notwithstanding, the translator has chosen to translate it into “peacefully” which is more natural in English. Unfortunately, one might be stretched placidly, but not peacefully, thus the translator has opted to change in the meaning to avoid jeopardising his uncompromising naturalness.

Example 8

Original: “*la’nnahu ‘athara ‘alā mā yshbihu al-waṣfa-l-balīgh **lisaṭwat** il-ghiyyāb al-ḥaḍir fī kalāmī*” (Darwīsh 2009: 166)

Translation: “because it had found something of an eloquent description for the **powerful** absence present in my words” (Antoon’s translation (2011: 148).

Similar simplification can also be seen in the very chapter. Once more, Antoon chooses to shift the register by selecting a cliché adjective, while the source equivalent is not marked, yet not a familiar tone; subsequently, he might have translated it into “dominant”.

Last but not least, the critique here does not underestimate in any way the well-knitted translation made by a poet and novelist genius; however, Sinan’s simple, poetic and natural style that can be traced in his novels such as *Ave Maria* and in his poetry also such as *A butterfly and Three Lilies*. In plain English, Antoon’s could neither solve the equation of literary translation (i.e. creative writing minus the self), nor set his own self free to fly within Darwish’s world. Nonetheless, he could bestow another life to the text with a subdued self who has creatively endeavoured to operate under the shadow of the source self; simply, because it is impossible to translate the self. Even the same author cannot. In this context, there are no words truer than those of the Swedish author Theodor Kallifatides (2003: 4) who admitted “I soon realized that I was unable to translate my own works. The only thing I could do was to rewrite my books. They became different books. Another rhythm, another style, another sense of humour, sadness and another love.” It seems that Antoon has unravelled the riddle and provided his reading to the text, since he himself has translated his novel entitled “the Pomegranate” in Arabic into “*the Corpse Washer*” in English. On one hand, this translation has narrowed some dimensions of the text. On the other hand, it has opened new horizons to the text. Furthermore, if Darwish were still alive, he would appreciate the translation as he once stated:

I examine it [the piece of writing he writes] if it were written by another author; actually, this how formulate my position on my poems. I write, put in the drawer and then I reread what has been written. If I can notice that the text smells me, so I can say that I’ve fallen in the snare of repetition...; however, when I feel if the poetry has been written by someone else.... Just then I can

say that the text has met the requirements and conditions I dream of (Hassan, 2008)<sup>4</sup>.

Consequently, we can rest assured that Darwīsh would love his simplified face in Antoon's mirror, as he would find it emanating fewer Darwīshean impulses.

### Concluding remarks

Darwīsh's impressive repertoire of immortal poems has brought about miraculous conceptions haunting a large readership all over the world. Translation is based precisely on transference of meanings across languages and should in the final analysis seek to get the target audience to appreciate the SL and its culture. It might reasonably be assumed that, it is unsuccessful particularly when it comes to poetry translation and, more particularly, when it comes to unrelated languages and cultures. In a nutshell, Antoon's translation has been well received by the community of translated literature and targeted audience; however, this does not turn us from the true mission of the literary translator, which is to aesthetically manifest as much as s/he can of the potentials of the literary text by conferring the dispersed original 'self' in the text a voice through his/her well-versed sensitive self and literary genius.

It is also clear that maintaining original 'self' is essential for communicative thrust in intercultural transaction. Translating the original 'self' seems to be valid and a *sine qua non* for observing as much emotiveness in the translation from Arabic into English as possible. The translators' strategies seem to be formal as can be shown in 'ashā'in (banquet) in Example 1; *kharajat* (left) in Example 2 and *wadā'* (farewell) and seem to have worked quite beautifully at first glance, but having indulged a little in the original text, we can easily notice a loss and how important it is for the translator to devise salient solutions to compensate inevitable loss of original 'self'.

Finally, the fact that translation is exacerbated by linguistic, stylistic, pragmatic, semantic and cultural remoteness between the SL and TL makes it urgent to drift away from these towards aesthetic appeal in poetry. The original poems are aesthetically pleasing, and the translation should be thereof. In

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://www.alkalimah.net/> accessed November 12, 2015.

the final analysis, translating poetry creates its own virtuous circle as it narrows the cultural gap between cultures. Through the aperture, we could see Homer, Virgil, Alighieri Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, etc.

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