

THE OBSESSION OF WASTELAND AND ABSURDITY AFTER WW2

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Abstract:

The World War II has caused a lot of panic and depress after the nuclear explosion. However, writers of post-apocalyptic fiction were obsessed with this type of genre. Their obsession led them to imagine this world as an empty meaningless world. The purpose of this study is to focus and analyze some works of fiction that have to do with the absurdity after the WW2. It will also bring out the obsession of post-apocalyptic writers with the wasteland and desert. It will focus on the nostalgia for the ruins of the previous civilization. The study will show how man is passionate and regret his destroyed world. Some post-war texts will be adapted to disclose the obsession of writing about the absurdity and wasteland after the nuclear explosion. The study will find out the plenty of obsession in the portrayal of the absurd world and the empty landscape. This creativity of such image came only after the witnessing of the nuclear world. The image of such absurd world and vast wasteland is bleak and horrible, yet it remains a jaw-dropping sort of portrayal.

Keywords: *Wasteland, absurdity, post-apocalypse, ruins.*

Introduction

This topic has come to me when I remembered myself in some mountain of my country when I was a little boy. I was a shepherd and I used to love climbing the mountain near to my village. Of course, I had no idea at all that one day I could be writing some research about some topic of the destroyed nature. It came to my mind when I studied American literature, especially science fiction (SF) and its sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. I happened to know the pastoral life in American literature after some apocalypse targets some part of America or any other part of the world.

As a little shepherd, the view in that mountain looked to me sort of there was some life of a previous civilization established on that mountain. Still, nobody knows how that civilization got destroyed or it just collapsed by itself. Some ruins of that city remain until today and it shows some of the hard life that those people lived. It vanished and no one cares about what sort of life those people had. The history of that city on that mountain remains mysterious and the only thing that we got was a myth. The myth says that the people there got perished because of their filthy deeds. When those people realized that they were a small community, they decided to increase their number to face the huge number of wild animals. They committed obscenity in the dark and had what was called a night of a love fair. They spent that night until almost dawn. Thus, the myth says that God causes them to perish by sending small bugs to where they lived. Therefore, their history was buried.

The Obsession of the Perishing after the Nuclear WW2

After the world war 2, and after witnessing the nuclear explosion, the world was obsessed with the ghost of a third nuclear war. There was kind of a bleak mood and melancholic atmosphere spread out and made everybody dream of the perishing of this world. The life then became absurd and of no meaning. A huge explosion of post-apocalyptic literature emerged and gave a dark picture of the world if something

targeted the world on a large scale. There is also a kind of fascination of the ruined cities or countries and this is something that humankind, by nature, is contemplating. It is also fabulous to know that there are some natural phenomenons and we take it like a great event. Wars, earthquakes, floods, cyclones, storms, volcanic explosions, wood fires, etc. are things that we want to imagine life in such state after any of these things may occur on a large scale. The cosmic phenomenon is also another kind of man's passion to discover the universe, although these things are scary and could be the reason for the man's extermination.

After the world war2, novelists focused on the absurdity of life after some apocalypse hits the earth. Things would definitely change in a way that people believe that life of this world has no meaning because a huge part of it has become something from the past and it is too difficult for human kind to reestablish what has been destroyed. We can also find the Theater of Absurd which came with an absent story and a random plot. *"There is an absence of story, organized plot, and characterization"* (Bennett, 2011). But this study is concerning the novel that came after the World War 2. The absurdity of the novels and the plays in that period were dominating the years after the war. The movement of the Theater of the Absurd continued for some time, but absurdity and wasteland continued in novels. There is some dissimilarity in concerning the absurdity in the Theatre of the Absurd and the absurdity in the novels. The first is concerning the plot and the dialogue between the characters. Beckett for example *"proposed a reflection on the form of drama, drawing the audience's attention to the artificiality of speech, plot and characters on the stage"* (Alegre, 1995, p 23). However, the second refers to the details of the life which has become absurd because the world has become empty. This emptiness is due to the apocalypse that targeted the whole world and annihilated its population. Yet, Theater of the Absurd was also a fiction that showed the horrible life in a wasteland world. *"The horrible picture they paint of our world should be surveyed and judgement formed to see if America has really become a barren, sterile, wasteland which is devoid of morality, religion, and love"* (Bennett, 2011, p 103)

Wasteland after the Nuclear Explosion

The element of the ruins in post-apocalyptic fiction is not enough to capture the mind of the reader, moreover, post-apocalyptic fiction is rich with images of the barren landscape. The fabulous appearance of the blank world is a striking portrayal of the author's creativity. In postmodern literature where post-apocalyptic fiction was the dominant genre in that period, the image of the world appears horrifying and appalling. The authors would show the world as an endless desert after the vanishing of human most likely due to a nuclear holocaust that might have wiped out the entire world. But as mentioned earlier some pockets of survivors are scattered here and there to start their spiritual journey. This journey is indeed fateful for their existence in a world the life in it became nihilistic and the earth turned out to a wasteland. Slocombe depicts the pervasion of the desert and the disappearance of man:

"The image of the blank desert pervades most of the postmodern 'literature of the end' in a number of different ways, from the desert that is created as a result of nuclear holocaust or pollution, to the desert that appears in conjunction with the disappearance of the human and the destruction of meaning. The 'meaning' of the desert has thus shifted from the benign image of a place of introspection towards a more malign environment in which the apocalypse has already happened" (Slocombe, 2006, 186).

As a matter of fact, in postmodern fiction, genres like post-apocalyptic, post-holocaust appeared after the nuclear explosion in 1945 and these genres depicted astonishing images on how the world turned into a silent and a hollow planet after some apocalypse hit the earth. The life that exists there is the life after the apocalyptic catastrophe which leaves nothing behind. This nothingness dominates the whole world and shows the nihilistic landscape. The world becomes absurd and the life in it becomes meaningless. There is some relation to the significance of the wasteland in post-apocalyptic fiction. When life becomes of no meaning, it is obvious to see a nihilistic world where nothing exists but a large yellow desert and the world becomes absurd because the life of this world is not precious anymore. The reason is that the future is

already gone and there are no more signs of living in a world of nothingness. All forms of life are absurd and do not promise any hope of rising civilization and the ruins are a picture of that destroyed society. However, the obsession of showing these ruins in such society is an esthetic portrayal.

The ruins of contemporary society, latent on the urban landscape, are privileged spaces, which simultaneously invoke reactions of repulsion and sublimity. Temporarily, intimate with our own age, they have yet to submit to simple aestheticism, which annihilates their potential to disrupt convention. Instead, these ruins are close enough to the present to mirror an alternative past/present/future (Trigg, 2006, p xxvi).

As mentioned earlier, post-apocalyptic world is a world of nothingness, in other words, the nihilistic state of the world resulted in a life of meaninglessness which shows the absurdity of this world. The journey of living in a post-apocalyptic world is one that someone finds himself wandering aimlessly through a huge wasteland of emptiness and the entire life is of no significance. But the human keeps searching for a trace of hope to establish himself and make a new history. His passion for living and hatred of demise gives him power and hope to move forward. Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (quoted in Slocombe, 2006, 186) gives a fabulous depiction of the permanent attempts of searching in the vast desert:

I would go to the desert, to the waste heart of that vast country, the desert on which they turned their backs for fear it would remind them of emptiness the desert, the arid zone, there to find, chimera of chimeras, there, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks of the untenanted part of the world, I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself" (Carter, 1996 p. 38.).

The description of Carter of the blank world is so terrifying and it reveals the atrocity and hideousness of the imagined scene when the human race is wiped out and only some remaining pockets are scattered in the vast wasteland. This obsession of portrayal actually, has come from the deep contemplation of the nuclear future of the world. The nuclear explosion was some helpful element of post-apocalyptic fiction to make its appearance after the nuclear war. The last man or the end of the world kind of depiction came earlier in some novels before the nuclear world war. But what comes after the end of the world was the ultimate logic question in post-apocalyptic fiction. In fact, the notion of the end of the world in literature was not as important as the aftermath of the end of the world and here the authors show a lot of creativity in presenting bleak and gloomy images of the life after the world is devastated. The image came into a plenty of fascination and fantasy, but there is more tendency towards a mythical type of portrayal which had its plausibility from science fiction. Moreover, the depiction of the wasteland in the distant future is really an image full of suspense throughout the whole novel. The horrifying portrayal in the blank planet is full of excitement and feeling arousing. Thus, the ugly and awful desert is actually more exciting and sort of feeling stirring in a fictional world. In his *Earth Abides*, Stewart depicts the state of despair to cross the desert wasteland:

To cross those two hundred miles of desert, men had carried water in their cars even in the Old Times. There were stretches where one might have to walk for a full day to reach even a roadside stand if the car went bad. He could take no chances now, when no one would be coming to help him" (Stewart, 1980, 41).

Novels like Ballard's *The Drought* (1965), and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are a fascinating work of showing man's hand in nature and how the science is turning the earth into a vast desert. The barren land in the play of *Waiting for Godot* (1956) by Samuel Becket is the best portrayal of absurdity. Becket gave a clear demonstration of how the world is a trivial place when there is nothing to live for. The nihilism in the story is the author's device of fixation of nothingness which came after the apocalypse. The Theater of the Absurd came at that time after some years of the nuclear explosion namely in the 1950s, when the world still did not wake up from the nightmare of the nuclear war. The Theater of the Absurd is a different type of fiction, but the desert and the wasteland were the main elements in showing how the world was

living a meaningless life after the catastrophe of the nuclear war. The years after the nuclear world war were the hardest and most difficult bearing ones in the entire history and the world witnessed the premature demise of its existence. The state of horror in that period stripped people away from spirituality and implanted infertility in their hearts so people found the world barren and desert. Slocombe puts the absurd world in a logical significance.

Here, the nihilism of human society the 'state of nihilism' is shifted to the blank desert of nihilism, in which we scratch our ciphers over nothingness. This is essentially an absurd world, in which language no longer functions. Thus, although the desert holds a key role in the determination of nihilism within postmodern fiction, as the desertion of meaning, it also evokes absurdity. For this reason, this thesis shall now turn to study the form of the absurd within postmodern literature (Slocombe, 2006, 197).

So there is some relation in the sense that the desert is a evoke of absurdity in a post-apocalyptic world where life there became irrational. To live in a world where devastation turned the landscape into an arid wasteland is an absurd decision, but authors leave no options for survivors who must go through this cataclysmic event. This choice of the desert as the permanent settings of the novel reflects the disappearance of emotionality from people's hearts. The vast wilderness of the landscape is a true matching of the stiffness of hearts which became empty of faith and mercy. So in any portrayal of the absence of meaning of life, writers tend to create such huge, absurd world where the pervasiveness of desert is the dominant scene. Graulund depicts the desert setting in McCarthy's novels as the underlain message of the futile endeavor to restore the past, or establish a new meaningful living:

Now Cormac McCarthy has never been willing to offer his readers the meaning of his books on a silver platter. As some of his critics have suggested, it may even be that the central meaning of McCarthy's authorship, the central message, is that there is no meaning to be found. In this sense, the desert seems the perfect setting, the ultimate scenery for a writer who seemingly adheres fully to Abbey's creed that the desert simply is: 'What does it mean? It means nothing. It is as it is and has no need for meaning' (Abbey 1971, 244). The all-consuming desert travelled by the man and his son means absolutely nothing but that it is omnipresent and that 'it is as it is'. This lack of meaning, then, must necessarily remain the central conundrum posed by *The Road*" (Graulund, 2010, 69).

Absurdity after the Nuclear Explosion

There is much presence of absurdity in the 1950s work of fiction and the reason was in the wallow between absolutism and relativism of religion in the western culture. This blur of vision into the future was an essential motive towards more pessimistic and somber kind of envisage. On witnessing the global catastrophe of the nuclear explosion, there was some mental and psyche collapse and the world went through a fateful crisis of faith. This gave rise to different genres of literature to appear and dominate the stylistic type of writing postmodern literature. Post-apocalyptic, post-holocaust or the Theater of the Absurd all pictured the life in an absurd world where living had become meaningless and of no purpose. These genres also showed the state of despair and hopelessness in a consumed world where skepticism of faith was the predominant attribute of the remaining survivors. Craig depicts the decline into the absurdity because of the denial of the absolute existence of God and this denial would lead humanity to live a worthless life:

This denial of absolutes has gradually made its way through Western culture. In each case, it results in despair, because without absolutes man's endeavors degenerate into absurdity. Schaeffer believes that the Theater of the Absurd, abstract modern art, and modern music such as compositions by John Cage are all indications of what happens below the line of despair. Only by reaffirming belief in the absolute God of Christianity can man and his culture avoid inevitable degeneracy, meaninglessness, and despair" (Craig, 2008, 70).

The life in the absurd world does not end by feeling alienated in the huge wasteful landscape but the end is the advent thing that all remaining survivors are waiting for. There is no redemption or sign of any outright rescue and the life does not basically go to the primitive age as per some critics' but the matter is far beyond any kind of escape or salvation. Death is the only salvation of the lifeless world and it becomes the easy way out. In *The Road* (2006) by McCarthy, the mother contemplated suicide and finally decided to leave that world because there wasn't any hope of salvation and if she remained alive she could get killed or raped by the cannibals. Finally, she committed suicide and left behind her son and her husband suffering the hardship of living in a merciless world. The following dialogue between the man and his wife is depicting the state of the hopelessness of the wife to have decided to die and taken the death as a lover and salvation of her misery thus she is beyond any listening of advice to drop the idea of killing herself:

I dont know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

I wouldnt leave you.

I dont care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like.

I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes he is.

Please dont do this.

I'm sorry.

Most people contemplate how they are going to die and aggrieve for they'll become non-being but they prefer to die and rest in peace. When their life is full of bestowal and bounty, they wish to die for a purpose and be remembered for their life before death, but when their life turns into a pandemonium, they just want to die and nothing but dying. The post-apocalyptic world is one full of absurdity and meaninglessness. The wasteland and the barren vast landscape that the man is encountering in such annihilated world is the inevitable death in advance and the individuals after a long fight for establishing a new life become submissive and willing to take death as their final destination. So in the absurd world death becomes inescapable and finally becomes a destination towards which the inhabitants are heading. Bowden (quoted in Graulund 2010, 70) is commenting on his novel *Blue Desert* (1986) and magnifies the sureness of death in a world turned into a wild desert.

I have walked hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles in the desert and yet my thoughts about it are very few and I spend very little time thinking these thoughts. [Yet] here I know this fact: the desert is where I want to die, where I do not fear death, do not even consider it. Here death is like breathing. Here death simply is (Bowden 1997, 143).

The absurdity of living in a wilderness is the passing way to the end of life and the authors certainly giving these images of death as the unwelcome visitor to these remaining survivors but in a slow motion. Writers of the post-apocalyptic fiction do not usually show their readers how the vast majority of the world got annihilated rather they are interested in how to give a visible image on the lifelessness after the apocalypse. The imagination of the world after an end is a challenging sort of speculative creativity, however, the genre came in different forms of fictions. The most incredible kind of novels are those which depict the life of individuals in a vast blank world which brought devastation on a large scale and the few remaining survivors are the ones on whom the authors tell their stories. Because without these survivors it is impossible to tell the story after the end of the world and these handful individuals are the remaining ones around which the rising actions are getting intensified and reaching its climax of the conflict.

There is, in fact, some sort of resurrection of life early in the novels and this resurrection is the keynote element on which the author starts his story. The resurrection after the end of the world is an essential part of the story. It is turning around the survivors and is allegorically a performance of the

spiritual journey which is full of the surrounding death. The emptiness of the landscape is the symbolism of the soullessness and the world becomes no longer an inhabitable place. Christian writers are affected by the life after death so resurrection came to compensate the lifeless world with a new life. Such life is fragile and easy to go but it spiritualizes the dead earth with a struggling spirit. According to the Christian world view, God does exist, and man's life does not end at the grave. In the resurrection, the man may enjoy an eternal life and fellowship with God. (Craig, 1994,p72).

This portrayal of resurrection for this type of fiction is like a relief and taking another chance to put together oneself and start again. The people after the apocalypse realize the hardship of living in an empty world and yet they continue searching for salvation. The author puts the individuals in a decaying world to increase the amount of suffering before death. He could have finished them earlier in the event of the apocalypse, but it is important in such type of fiction to show the life after the occurrence of the tremendous event so the resurrection of some individuals is a major aspect of showing the absurd life in the wilderness. The temporal life in a such consumed world is an incarnation of the frailty of living where death became the king of the vast wilderness. Graulund commenting on Bowden's remarks of travel in the *Blue Desert* (1986) and refers that to the travel of the boy and his father in their travel across the wilderness in McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)

The problem of all wildernesses, and in particular wildernesses as impoverished as those of the desert, is that if death is forced upon you, if you find yourself in a space where death is indeed 'like breathing' (Bowden), the charm of dying wears off rather quickly. This is precisely the problem faced by the man and the boy as they find themselves in a space where they have to 'inhale' death every year, every day and every hour, a presence they have as little hope of escaping as the necessity to take another breath. Consequently, they find themselves in a state in which it is very difficult to appreciate anything, even survival itself (Graulund, 2010, 70).

The Theater of the Absurd and the post-apocalyptic fiction are the best genres to show the absurdity of living in a lifeless world. Also, the essence of the lifelessness in such a world is the absence of God and such absence of God does not genuinely occurred in the series of actions but it occurred in the minds of the individuals. The state of misery and waiting for a redemption to save them out of this predicament is the major factor that the individuals, in such tremendous despair, undergo a collapse of faith and an increase of disbelief. The more the despair in such terminated world the more the atheism. Yet some individuals remain theistic and prefer to continue as such in the world of nothingness. Because deep inside them, there is a tremendous faith and the nihilistic life in the outside world does not thrill their feelings to go blind in faith. They still believe in some redemption from God to come and lift up the calamity of their existence. In *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Becket, two persons spend their time waiting for Godot to come and save them. They are in a miserable predicament and they have a hope that Godot will come so they decide to wait up until Godot (God, maybe) bestow on them with salvation thus, they continue their trivial conversation until he may come. Craig discloses that man is always seeking refuge and help from God, his Redeemer:

His Apology (referring to Blaise Pascal was evidently to comprise two divisions: in the first part he would display the misery of man without God (that man's nature is corrupt) and in the second part the happiness of man with God (that there is a Redeemer). With regard to the latter, Pascal appeals to the evidences of miracle and especially fulfilled prophecy. In confirming the truth of man's wretchedness Pascal seeks to unfold the human predicament (Craig, 2008, 66).

To put this into some philosophical argument, the happiness of man is confined to his self-consciousness to seeing or contemplating the universe around him. If he gets the satisfaction of his own being, he could reach the ultimate happiness and bliss which both necessitate a struggle and mental

reconciliation altogether. Naturally, man is content to live a normal life, but deep inside him, there is a spiritual impetus urging him to search for his being and how he came into existence. When life is normal there is neither harm nor any skeptical thoughts occupying his mind, but when life is uneasy and full of atrocities and unjust, a man becomes confined to his scruples and uncertainty in terms of his being and the existence of God. The non-stop travel into the wasteland for a comfort of living is a fabulous personification of the tedious search for God's redemption and assistance. There is a return to God in the state of helplessness and powerlessness when the plight of man becomes superior and transcending his capability and capacity of response. The amounts of the predicament in the wasteland grow immensely so much so it leaves no option for the individuals to go for any confrontational attempts. The state of the survivors is beyond any restore and the only solution in such peculiar placement is to seek salvation from God. The post-apocalypse strips away human and consumes all his skills and ingenuities to go for any attempts of reestablishing a new civilization or rebuilding their society. But if these survivors work on this issue they will end up cast in a horrific solitude and they will realize that what they will do is a futile and wasteful kind of effort.

Disintegration and Wilderness

The state of disorder and lawlessness is the main hindrance in a such desolated world where the survivors suffering the scarcity of food and water, not to mention the other deadly reasons that will certainly exterminate the remaining survivors such as the infections, the burning sun which can cause cancer or any sort of encountering with bestial animals. There is a sort of inclination towards savagery and the pre-catastrophe civilization will degenerate. The disintegration of humanity is the most prevailing feature in the post-apocalyptic world, thus the scenario after the apocalypse will be wilderness versus urbanization and civilization versus savagery. The only outlet of this predicament is to establish law or even sovereignty so as to impose control and order. But the nature of the wildlife will be the main reason toward the tendency of dehumanization and there will be also some proclivity for more savagery and brutality.

William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) is a novel which is explicitly not an open post-apocalyptic kind of fiction rather it is termed as a "proto-apocalyptic" one. These types of novels "*do not explicitly rehearse end-of-the-world scenarios, they nevertheless provide an influential discursive template which is recuperated into post-apocalyptic imaginaries*" (Power, 25). The novel presents a detailed depiction of the life in disorder and inhumanity. The setting of the story takes place on an isolated island where some schoolchildren inhabit that island after their arrival on an evacuating plane from England. The reason was the outbreak of the World War II and their government ordered for their evacuation. The plane falls and crashes before its safe landing on the island, but fortunately, the boys come out unscathed. After their settlement in this desolate island, they decide to establish order and law to ease their stay in this spot of the world. Golding masterly exposes his survived individuals to their nature where they become responsible for their behavior with one another. He displays the boys in a state where they have to establish their own community or they fall into degeneracy. Their civilization gradually gives away and they slowly become uncivil and savage. They dispute over sovereignty and who is worthy of ruling over their small society.

This kind of novels set in post-apocalyptic world depicts the loss of order and the slow inclination toward more savage behavior. The erosion of law is the outcome of the inner nature of the civilized man if existing in a boundless and uncontrollable vacuum. The vast wasteland is the desolate nature that man turns to be a beast-like in treating with his kind being. In fact, the wilderness in the *Lord of the Flies* is basically an allegorical portrayal of the children psyche in such desolated part of the world and the aspect of turning into animalism is part of the bleak physical wilderness.

The atrocities of the Second World War were a shocking impression that Golding and other writers had at that time. Golding pessimistically depicted the inner savagery of the social man if drifted out of his regular world. He unfolds his dudgeon:

Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you could remove all social ills by a reorganization of society ... but after the war I was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another ... under-standing that man produces evil as a bee produces honey ... I believed that the condition of man was to be a morally diseased creation (Power, 27).

In a post-apocalyptic world, where life is sort of degenerated, there is a dominant conflict between urbanization and wilderness which the nature of the landscape is too hard to endure. The survivors struggle to restore their lost civilization and nature is beyond any reform. The essence of evil and destruction of nature is a phenomenal event if not belonging to the interference of man. The worst thing that could result from the interference of man could be a mass destruction of the whole world due to some nuclear warfare. However, the demolishment of mankind from the surface of the earth could also come from a natural phenomenon such as a comet collision, flood or some destructive earthquake. The pre-catastrophe civilization does not exist after the apocalypse, but the remaining survivors who exemplify the lost civilization are in face with the altered nature to keep their entity away from the impact of wilderness. The *Lord of Flies* presented the essential conflict between savagery and civilization. The nature of alienation from the familiar world stripped the survived boys away from their civilized nature and drives them off their social manners and traditions. The new nature of living in the wilderness is a new altering kind of environment and the boys slowly becoming slaves and followers of their driving mood. The boys are not able to live in peace and harmony, though they are only a group of survivors in an attempt to establish their small community. Their small age is not basically the main hindrance to organize themselves and work under some absolute sovereign, but the inner beast of human comes out and panic for the lust of killing and ruling.

Conclusion

Thus the desolate landscape of the bestial nature is the main reason why human is turning from a peaceful, civilized kind of being into one whose quest is mainly to survive over other inferior ones. His return to the harsh nature as his home of living dehumanizes him and shapes his way of behaving with others under some critical situations of some post-apocalyptic life. It also shapes his trend toward violence and bestiality. The surrounding environment is the most influential part of his psyche transformation into a beast-like being.

In conclusion, the writers who came after the nuclear explosion have insisted on creating their own world. This world is the outcome of their an involuntary obsession with the state of absurdity and wasteland after some nuclear war or any other apocalypse. The passion of crying for the previous life is something natural. It proves that man is always clinging to nature and any disturbance of this nature is also a disturbing factor of mind. Thus the stability of mind will change automatically with the change of environment.

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