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Extending the Nietzschean Metaphor of the Death of God in Poetry through Interrogating Style and Culture

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Abstract

This paper works from the perspectives of poetry, style, philosophy and culture to explore the extension of the Nietzschean metaphor of the "Death of God" in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Chinua Achebe's "The Lament of the Sacred Python" and "The Penalty of the Godhead." The paper exposes the interconnectedness of these poems of varied eras through their thematic thrust made prominent by the style adopted by the different poets. It argues that the link between the philosopher and the poets is their concern for the health of society. The reading of the selected four poems on the subject matter of the presumed loss of faith in God or gods and the promotion of more reliance on science and liberality by neoliberal world authorities reveal the dynamics of the contemporary terrain and its effects on the psyche of world citizens. The research reveals that the goal of the poets in the depiction of the precipice to which man is bound in their poetry is not only to historicize and poeticize their worries but also to escalate the situation of future members of society to such a point that caution could be taken and unwise philosophies jettisoned for time tested principles. It is also the goal of the poets to create an atmosphere for psychological healing. The research concludes that these poems have been able to drive home their point that God is not dead but that humanity has lost their way and place and is heading towards the precipice.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Death of God, Arnold, Eliot, Achebe, culture, poetry, stylistics

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher wrote, "'Where is God?' 'I will tell you. We have killed him— you and I. All of us are his murderers'" (119-120). The Mad Man, Nietzsche's voice in *The Gay Science* continues, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (120). This statement has become popularly known as Nietzsche's "death of God" theology. This essay argues that this theology has two angles to it. The first angle refers to the decline of the belief in a supreme being who has divine powers to succor. In support of this stance, Nietzsche argues that the modern world is losing grasp of the traditional Christian belief in a loving God who created the world, set moral standards and promised the saints eternal life.

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He cried and asked: "But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?" He asks further: "[W]hat after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?" (120). "Could it be possible! This old hermit in the forest has not yet heard of it, that God is dead!" — Nietzsche declares later in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 35). The second angle to the theology looks at how contemporary society is progressively losing the cohesive influence of a value system to steer its actions and decisions. The once revered values and guiding principles of culture that held society together has become comparable to relics that can be discarded due to competing interests that have now mutated the sense of value society projects. Patrick Roney highlights this position when he proposed that: "[T]he meaning of the death of God lies in the sphere of moral values and valuation, and what the name "God" refers to is a hierarchical system of values that affirms otherworldly salvation based on the denigration of worldly existence" (98). Bretislav Horyna seems to project the same position when he argues against Nietzsche being the originator of this theology and explains that Nietzsche used the proclamation "as an illustrative shortcut when describing the intercultural processes of his time, with no ambition to originality, instead, with the clear intention of shaking up the (non)thought of the comfortable bureaucrats and legalistic petit bourgeois of Germany in the late 19th century" (1).

In the following analysis, we explore the complex world of Poetry by examining how poets engage the stylistic use of language to extend the Nietzschean theology or metaphor cum philosophy of the death of God and assert that the poetry selected for the examination are set to mourn the assumed and proleptic death of a stabilizing culture in contemporary times. T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men", Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Chinua Achebe's "Lament of the Sacred Python" and "Penalty of the Godhead" serve as the primary data for this research. T. S. Eliot doubles as both American and English poet. He is a twentieth century poet and averse to modern society's proneness to loss of religious faith, a background which he shares with Matthew Arnold, an unarguable nineteenth century English poet. Though Chinua Achebe has no English citizenship, he is from Nigeria, a former British or English colony and poet who writes in English. The three poets selected for this study are connected by the fact that they are modern poets. Their four poetic works, though diverse in origin and era, share common thematic threads – the erosion of belief in the once venerated gods, small or mighty through the activities of men which have waned their significance in society. They also share the theme of the waning moral values plaguing modern or contemporary society.

By examining the distinctive stylistic choices employed by the three selected poets, this paper aims to uncover the insights they offer into the loss of faith in cultural spiritual icons or gods and the consequential effects on the nature of modern man. Through a close examination of elements of phonetics and phonology, lexico-semantics and syntax, we demonstrate how these poems artfully convey the notion that gods, godly figures and what they stand for, both divine and philosophical, have lost their potency and are becoming relics of bygone era as they are being replaced by new fancies created by modern and contemporary men.

The Ideological Syntax of the Death of God

The manipulation of syntax serves as a powerful tool for conveying important themes and ideas, especially in poetry. In the four poems under study, a close examination of the syntactic choices and structural elements employed by the poets suggest a collective message. The analysis shows the ingenious ways in which syntax functions as a medium for conveying the poets' shared message of the decline and ultimate demise of the belief in gods and God in the modern world. Among the syntactic elements used in these poems include the use of enjambment, parallelism and repetition, varying sentence types, modality, ellipsis and fragmentation.

Enjambment is a common style used in these poems. The poets use it to create a sense of continuity and flow. Nonetheless, it is observed to also serve other purposes. In "The Hollow Men" (THM), a poem in which the poet has been quoted in an interview to say has connection with his prominent poem, The Wasteland. In that interview, Eliot notes:

> *The Hollow* Men originated out of separate poems… That's one way in which my mind does seem to have evolved through the years poetically—doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of focusing them together, altering them, making a kind of whole of them… The Hollow Men are like the city crowds of The Wasteland, the damned who are so because of lack of spiritual reality, even their sins lacking violence and conviction. (as qtd in Frank Kermode and John Hollander).

The above reflects the poet's ability to fuse and align seemingly unconnected parts to create beauty and highlight social reality through the tool of enjambment. Through its creative use of this poetic tool, the poem tends to create a sense of resignation. For example, lines 2 to 4 and 5 to 10 below, its use gives the poem a tone of emptiness and futility: "We are the stuffed men / leaning together/headpiece filled with straw" (Lines 2 -4).

> Alas!
>
> Our dried voices, when
>
> We whisper together
>
> Are quiet and meaningless
>
> As wind in dry grass
>
> Or rats' feet over broken glass
>
> In our dry cellar. (Lines 5-10)

The above extract clearly extends Nietzsche's position of the after effect of man's killing of God through the use of enjambment. A strong connection can be drawn between the ideological position of Eliot's poem with what Nietzsche expresses through the Mad man in *The Gay Science*, when he asks: "[W]hat were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not fell the breath of empty space?" (120).

Eliot in a peculiar way draws inspiration from different sources to assert his ideological position. He does this through the epigraph he selected for the poem under study. From the epigraph, "Miztah Kurtz, he dead" to the last lines:

> This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

Eliot continues to use the musicality of enjambment to proleptically mourn the end of the world or the death of the natural and canal man who feels he can separate himself from God. The poem and the human world ending with a whimper reflects how man gradually and psychologically inundates himself from reason and estrange himself from being filled with supernatural power but embraces hollowness instead. Furthermore, the reader recognizes the similarity of stanza with the popular rhyme "[h]ere we go round the Mulberry bush…" This makes the reader to identify the contrast between the playful tone of the popular rhyme and the dark situation of the hollow men and this also makes the reader recognize the dim situation of the gods' powerlessness against their situation.

In the first stanza of "Lament of the Sacred Python" (LOTSP), the uninterrupted quality of the use of enjambment creates a sense of awe, reverence, pride and dignity. In the second stanza, it creates a sense of intrusion and desecration. In the third, it creates a sense of humiliation and persecution; in the fourth, a sense of betrayal and loss, while in the last, it creates a sense of horror and despair. This sense that the use of enjambment brings about in the poem, creates a sense of contrast in tone between the past and gradually unfolding present. It suggests from the perspective of a god what it means to lose attention or to be displaced and that these gods are not powerful after all, but are only given prominence by men; a mirage that is confused for power.

The flowing lines in Arnold's "Dover Beach" also contribute to the sense of desolation and hopelessness expressed in Eliot and Achebe's poems above. For example, lines 21-23 which reads: "The sea of Faith/Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore/Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" shows how faith has since receded in modern social landscape. This suggests that the world has no sustaining force because the foundation of faith was hinged on an unsustainable source and as Nietzsche queries: "[H]as it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?" (181).

In "The Hollow Men" (THM) the repetition of phrases like: "We are the hollow men" and "we are the stuffed men" in lines 2 and 3, 17 and 18 emphasizes the futility of emphasizing the permanence of any creation of man. The poet uses repetition to drive home the idea that gods created by men become meaningless and powerless with time the same way men who cut themselves from their creator become hollow. The juxtaposition of 'hollow' and 'stuffed' in these parallel structures, which suggest a stark contrast between the outer faced (stuffed) and the inner emptiness (hollow) of these gods, allows one to perceive the disconnect between the superficial appearance and the absence of spiritual depth. Similarly, in lines 72 to 90 the parallel structures and the artful use of repetition present the lines as distinct pairs, where the initial lines convey a sense of powerlessness and passitivity attributed to these small gods (for example, idea, motion, act, emotion, desire, potency, essence), while the subsequential lines suggest a more powerful manifestation of genuine power, a contrast to the portrayal in the first lines. The repeated invocation of 'For Thine is the Kingdom' apparently references the presence of a higher celestial power, establishing itself as the referential point for the second lines with words like reality, act, creation, response, spasm, existence, and descent). This

referential reality connects Eliot's poem to Achebe's "Penalty of the Godhead." In the narrative poem, Achebe presents in the form of a parable a practical poetic example of Nietzsche's position which is extended in THM but in Achebe's POTG, it also reflects on the place of the African household gods in the order of the sacred as exemplified in the narrated fire incident in the poem. The season is the dry season or the harmattan season. This season is symbolic in this poem. It represents a season of dryness, close and opposite metaphorically to the European season of winter. The harmattan season in Africa is a season when fire is frequent. The physical setting of the poem is the old man's hut in the rural area. The main furniture in the hut is a straw bed. The occupants of the hut are the old man, rats, roaches, and the household gods. According to the poem, the old man who is stricken in age manages to escape the fire. The rats and roaches also escape the fire. Only the household gods are left to perish in the fire. The significance of this part of the poem is relevant to assessing the relationship which exists among the gods. Extracts from the poem are quoted below:

> The old man's bed
> of straw caught a flame blown
> from overnight logs by harmattan's
> incendiary breath. Defying his age and
> sickness he rose and steered himself
> smoke-blind to safety.
> …
> Household gods alone
> frozen in ritual black with blood
> of endless tribute festooned in feathers
> perished in the blazing pyre
> of that hut.

The situation the poem paints is the type that causes one to raise questions. The first question likely to be raised is: why is the main character in the poem an old man? The second question could be: Were the household gods burnt or their effigies victims of the inferno? The third question that could be asked is: Why is there no attempt made to save the gods or their effigies? The fourth question is: What message is the poet trying to send? The answers to these questions reveal the thrust of the poem and fundamental part of the argument of this paper.

An attempt at the first question raised reveals that the worship of the gods has been abandoned by the young. This reflects the first penalty that the household gods have to suffer, their abandonment by the rising generation. This abandonment reflects their death and the disenchantment of this younger generation towards traditional religion. The disenchantment of the youth towards traditionally worshipped gods hint on the philosophical death of smaller gods as an extension of the proclamation by Nietzsche. This abandonment, going by the title of the poem, also portends that they have incurred the wrath of a higher God. The fire in the poem is a firm acknowledgement of this wrath. It is this fire that carries out the penalty of the Godhead. The Godhead in the poem is perhaps the Igbo "Chukwu" who dwells in the sky and is the head of other gods in Igbo cosmology. This position becomes clear when the poem

is read along with Achebe's position in the essay, "The Igbo World and Its Art." Achebe notes in this essay that: "in popular contemporary usage the Igbo formulate their view of the world as "No condition is permanent." In Igbo cosmology, even gods could fall out of use; and new forces are liable to appear without warning in the temporal and metaphysical firmament" (64).

The use of parallelism and repetition in THM clearly highlights the disparity between the feeble deities and true divine power. These further reinforce the fact that small gods are impotent contraptions that fall out of significance with time. In lines 11 and 12 which reads: "Shape without form, shade without colour,/Paralysed force, gesture without motion;" the parallel structures also reinforce this same idea – that these contraptions of man have lost their significance and presence in the world.

In the concluding lines in the poem, repetition and parallelism are also used. They end in a very pessimistic note for the gods. The use of parallelism and repetition here suggests a sense of futility and inevitability, suggesting that the world of idols and significance is collapsing and they are helpless to prevent it. In all, parallelism and repetition as used in this poem, contributes to the overall mood of despair and hopelessness associated with any belief in small gods.

In "LOTSP", the use of parallelism and repetition in lines 29 and 30, not only creates a sense of urgency by highlighting the danger the python faces but also emphasizes the contrast between the python's once respected status and its current predicament. Their use in these lines effectively highlights the loss of reverence for the python, indicating that small gods have lost their significance in today's society. Achebe uses the poem to buttress the effect of colonialism and its culture and religion on African traditional religion and culture. The poem also reflects the abandoning of African traditional religion for the religion of the colonial missionaries by younger Africans. The poem reflects on the age of African traditional religion and culture as well. This is indicative of what the python says in the poem thus, "I was there when lizards// were ones and twos, child/ of ancient river god Idemili…" Basil Davidson confirms this:

The origin of religion in Africa, as in other continents, lie far back in the dawn of human society. They took shape in remote times when mankind first multiplied and spread across the world… the python was honoured in ancient Meroe, capital of the African empire of Kush on the middle Nile, more than two thousand years ago; and the python is similarly honoured in other African lands. (156)

Despite the age of the African traditional religion and culture, its contact with a new religion and culture still created a conflict that led to its being abandoned by the youth who are easily taken by what they see. As put by the python in the poem:

> But of late
>
> A wandering god pursued,
>
> It seems, by hideous things
>
> He did at home has come to us
>
> And pitched his tent here
>
> Beneath the people's holy tree
>
> And hoisted from its pinnacle

A charlatan bell that calls
Unknown monotones of revolts,
Scandals, and false immunities.
And I that none before could meet except
In fear though I brought no terrors
From creation's day of gifts I must now
Turn on my track
In dishonorable flight
Where children stop their play
To shriek in my ringing ears:
Look out, python! Look out, python!
Christians relish python flesh!

The ideology expressed by Achebe's poem shows, arguably, that the deities never really had true sustainable power in the first place. However, the voice of the python in this poem is representative of the voice of Africa and of her people. The views of the python can as well stand for the views of the poet and any true African who knows that a man does not throwaway what makes him unique because he wants to look like another person.

"Dover Beach" (DB) has a similar use of parallel structures as is noticeable in Achebe's poem analysed above. Lines 32 to 34 reveal striking parallel structures– 'so various, so beautiful, so new / Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor peace, nor help for pain' these lines illustrate the dwindling prominence of religious faith in today's society. The initial description of the world as "various" and "beautiful" suggests an image of former glory which is reminiscent of the once revered faiths. However, the subsequent phrase demonstrates that the once revered deities lack the ability to control their destinies and have become powerless to offer a sense of security or calm.

Epistemic modality used to express certainty and uncertainty can be seen in line 1 of LSP – "I was there". This expresses a sense of certainty while "it seems" in line 14 conveys doubt and uncertainty. Line 1 thus highlights the changing beliefs and values and reinforces the fact that idol gods are no longer essential and that their existence is uncertain and fading away. Again, there is the use of sentence type to suggest that suggests that the gods are no longer revered. For example, the use of declarative sentences by the python (line 6). However, in lines 29/30, imperative sentences are used to instruct or command the python to "look out!" – conveying a sense of urgency and warning to the once- revered and feared python.

Ellipsis and Fragmentation are other syntactic elements seen to stylistically convey meaning in the poems. They are seen to contribute to the themes of emptiness, powerlessness, and despair. For example, in THM the poet uses them to show the disjointed and disconnected nature of the existence of small gods. In lines 92 -93, the use of ellipses suggests that something is missing, unspoken and unresolved. This mirrors the idea that the hollow men are incomplete and lost. This use of ellipses is also seen in lines 92-94 of the same poem, which is a biblical allusion to the Lord's Prayer. By breaking this reference with ellipses, the poem suggests a disconnect or inevitable absence of power and glory in the world of the small gods. This

reinforces the idea that the gods are helpless, impotent and that their world is on the brink of completely collapsing.

Phonological Idea of the Death of God

Phonological strategies that reinforce the idea that "God is dead" in the poems include the use of rhyme and rhythm, and alliteration. For example, in THM, the alliteration of / ʃ / in "shape without form" and "shade without colour" (line 11) reinforces the sense of formlessness and meaninglessness. It conveys the notion that their existence does not have relevance. Also, in line 68 -70, the alliteration of /p/- "prickly pear", in the adaptation of the nursery rhyme (here we go round the mulberry bush), apart from adding to the musicality of the poem, its abrupt percussive quality mirrors the harshness of the situation and highlights the contrast between innocence and human mourning. This creates a stark contrast between the original child-like imagery of the nursery rhyme and the prickly pear which is a symbol of hardship and adversity. This contrast suggests that people are engaging in futile and painful ritual or struggles. This highlights the sense of existential crises associated with lack of true divine guidance.

In "LOTSP", the alliteration of the / ʃ / in "relish" and "flesh" in line 30 mirrors the apparent disregard for the python. / ʃ / has a sharp and sibilant quality which may evoke a sense of mockery. The repetition, like a shushing sound may be said to accentuate a fading of the python's relevance in society.

Alliteration of certain sounds in lines 32 and 34 – "so various, so beautiful, so new / neither joy, nor love, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" contributes to the rhythmic patterns that mimic the poets' thoughts as he contemplates the idea of a continuous cycle of emptiness and despair in a world that lacks divine guidance.

Making Meaning of the Idea of the Death of God

The stylistic use of words also presents a very rich array of meaning that significantly contributes to the interpretation of the texts. The poems make use of such devices as imagery, figurative expressions, wordplay, intertextuality, collocation and aspects of pragmatics to drive home the idea that God is dead.

Imagery and is mostly seen to create a vivid sensory experience that enables readers connect with the idea that God is dead in the poems. For example, in the "Lament of the Scared Python", imagery reinforces the idea that the old sacred beliefs have lost their significance. Such words as "royal gait" and "sacred", and "dishonourable flight" and "betrayed", use imagery to contrast the past and present, illustrating the degradation of the python's status. They are used to show how things have changed for the worse for the gods. "Filling down funeral paths" also evokes a sense of death and foreboding and suggests that the presence of the python lacks any positive energy or enduring power and is doomed from the beginning to be discarded with. Also, in "THM", the use of such words as "stuffed", "straw", "dry grass", "paralysed force, "gesture without motion", evokes the imagery of a scarecrow with its illusory power and no real authority or influence. The use of such words creates a sense that the power of the gods relies on the misguided belief of humans rather than actual divine power. Being a

creation of the misguided beliefs of humans in their perfect imperfection, inconsistencies and the god's ultimate demise are bound to prevail.

There is the use of auditory imagery in lines 8 -9 of THM. Such words as "broken glass", "dry grass", "rat's feet", where the reader can almost hear the rustling of the grass and the unsettling sounds of rats moving over shattered glass enhances the emotional resonance of the poem and reinforces the theme of spiritual desolation in the poem. The world ending with a "whimper", (line 98) also has a similar effect, adding to the imagery of loss and insignificance that accompanies the hollow ones.

In "Dover Beach", Arnold's use of shifting tone, mood and images convey a sense of loss and emptiness. In the first stanza, the calmness of nature undisturbed is contrasted against the misery that humanity continue to embrace. For example, in lines 3/4, on the French coast the light gleans and is gone", suggests not only the fleeting nature of faith or hope in a fragile power but reflects the beauty of nature. At the end of this stanza, even nature begins to feel the precipice that man is heading towards as the waves "…bring / the eternal note of sadness in" (lines 13-14). The "sea of Faith", once "at the full", but now withdraws in a melancholic long roar (lines 21-26) in the third stanza of the poem also suggests this, in addition to a decline of religious beliefs and its influence in society. The core of the poem resides in the third stanza as reflected in these lines, the belief in nature's God "was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore/ lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" (lines 22-23). However, the final image of "ignorant armies" that "clash by night" in the last lines suggests war, chaos and violence that result from lack of divine insight or enlightenment that may lead to questions of the source of moral values and meaning in life.

Some references in the poems make use of references from external sources. Intertextuality references other texts and is observed to be used in this poem to enrich the meanings of the poems. In "THM" For example, the title and the epigraph of the poem are taken from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, in which the character Kurts, a corrupt colonialist, is described as "hollow at the core" (80). Eliot uses this reference to suggest that the hollow men are spiritually and morally empty. The hollow men are insignificant figures who have no true impact on society. In the poem, they are seen to have no true value or significance. In LSP, there is also reference to the last supper - "feast of an errant cannibal god/Tooth-filled to eat his fellow" (line 38-39), where Jesus is depicted as offering and eating his own flesh and blood in the Eucharist. However, in the poem, it is used to highlight how the Christian religion has invaded and consumed the traditional religion and how the python has lost its sacredness and power because it has no true power to defend itself with in the first place. In DB, the reference to Sophocles, the ancient Greek playwright, reporting that he had heard the same sound of the sea as the poet on the Aegean, suggests that human history has for a long time, had no divine plan or purpose. This further suggests that with only misguided beliefs, humans are doomed to lack meaningful existence like the melancholic withdrawal of fragile religious beliefs. Yes, humanity is doomed to fight blindly and senselessly as long as no true divine power guides their path. This is particularly reflected through the allusion to the historical future that Sophocles in *Antigone* foresaw, especially the danger that the world currently drives towards thus:

> Sophocles long ago
>
> Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery … (711)

Reading these same lines, Eric Trethewey, querying the genealogy of human misery, asserts that there has always been an attack on religious worship. Trethewey expounds on his position by drawing a connection between Arnold and Sophocles and notes further: "Sophocles occupied a position in antiquity analogous to Arnold's in the nineteenth century; he was a poet with a profoundly religious sensibility, articulating a religious view of life in an age when Greek religion, the traditional forms of belief, were losing their power to compel assent" (1320).

Components of literary pragmatics have also been deployed by the poets in revealing their ideological position and this can be seen in line 1 of "Dover Beach" – The sea is calm tonight. The use of the temporal deixis "is calm tonight", creates a sense of immediacy which suggests a quest for sense when all the noise of old beliefs have died down. In lines 1/22, one has to employ implicature to determine that the sea of faith is now low or empty, and that there is a decline in religious belief and practice. A kind of faith that losses its vitality in this manner is one which has been judged to be ineffective and impotent.

The use of figurative expressions such as the use of personification, ironies, paradox and metaphor also illustrate the fading significance of gods in the poems. In lines 41 to 44 in THM, there is the use of paradox the expression where "stone images" "receive the supplication of a dead man's hand". The paradox lies in the fact that they are stone images (inanimate) and yet, receive supplication, which is a religious divine act, yet the context is that of emptiness and desolation. This emphasizes the spiritual hollowness of the situation and reflects the futility of seeking divine intervention in impotent deities devoid of real meaning or power.

Conclusion

The fact that some men have killed God in their lives because of their embrace of neoliberalism, building their faith instead on science does not mean that God has ceased to be. We conclude as Gerald Manly Hopkins notes "And for all this, nature is never spent" (line 9, God's Grandeur"). We add that like the sea in DB bringing the eternal note of sadness in, that humanity has only caused deity to grieve over them, their loss and imminent destruction. These poems are warnings and if these warnings are heeded there may still be hope for humanity's redemption. God and nature are the stabilizing force that the world cannot do without.

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