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“Memory! You have the key”: On Memory, Transcendence, and Self-Mythology in Eliot, Nerval, Rimbaud and Mallarmé

T.S. Eliot’s road to temporal transcendence, one of the thematic and philosophical hallmarks of his *œuvre*, is a long one, and it is not until *Four Quartets* that he fully manages to go beyond the constraints imposed by time, reaching “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (*Complete Poems* 136). Nevertheless, Eliot’s efforts to achieve this aim are also manifested in the earlier poems, where the recurrent motifs of rebirth, resurrection and *chute aux enfers* are present. There is, however, another significant theme Eliot resorts to in his quest for transcendence: memory. The two relevant poems are, of course, “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” but memory is also an important element of the poetic vision in *Four Quartets*, though in a slightly different way. Whatever is the role and view of memory presented by Eliot in a particular poem, it is interesting to set his conception against the background of French symbolism.

It seems natural, in an analysis of memory and its functions, to start with “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” The latter contains references which are direct and explicit:

Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.
...
The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things [...] (*Complete Poems* 14)

The centrality of the theme to the poem is marked by the exclamation “Memory!” (16) in the closing stanza. Due to the way the problem is treated in the poems, “Preludes” and “Rhapsody” are commonly regarded as *par excellence* Bergsonian. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the analogies to the author of *Matière et Mémoire*, whose influence on Eliot was particularly strong at the time when he wrote both poems.

In part three of “Preludes,” a woman watches “the night revealing / The thousand sordid images” (*Complete Poems* 12) which make up her soul. At dawn, she has “such a vision of the street / As the street hardly understands” (13). It thus turns out that the

night-time images which “flickered against the ceiling” (13) make a vision of the street possible in the daytime. Nancy K. Gish explains this mysterious relationship in the light of Bergson’s philosophy:

Spirit, for Bergson, is pure memory. Matter is pure perception. The two unite in ‘memory-images’ which are memory beginning to materialise as a picture. Spirit and matter, then, connect in images, and none of these is ever wholly separate from the others. The woman’s mind and the street merge in the sordid images which constitute her soul. She is memory, perception and images combined, or body and soul, but she takes her images from contact with an external world. (5-6)

The same is applicable to the man in part four of the poem and the speaker in the first two parts.

Though it is not my intention to question or undermine the claim that such a concept of memory is Bergsonian, I cannot help seeing another parallel. It is one suggested by Eliot himself, if in a completely different context. The thesis he develops in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” is, I would argue, relevant to his treatment of memory in the early poems. The essay praises the metaphysical poets in contrast to their successors in English poetry. The celebrated and oft-quoted passage points to the reasons for such critical appraisal:

Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (*Selected Essays* 247)

Eliot then goes on to state the regrettable “dissociation of sensibility” (247) which characterizes modern verse and singles out three poets who have managed to avoid it: Laforgue, Corbière and Baudelaire.

The French symbolists therefore embody for what Eliot admires about metaphysical poetry: the capability for association, the ability to “put the material together again in a new unity” (245). In all of Eliot’s *œuvre*, the fear of disintegration is detectable. It is this dread of being left with “[a] heap of broken images” (*Complete Poems* 38) that must

have drawn Eliot to the symbolists, with their gift for uniting heterogeneous ideas, feelings and impressions, for “telescoping of images and multiplied associations” (*Selected Essays* 243). This “mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience” (247) is, of course, manifested in the symbolist way of constructing the poetic image.

The desire for unity, for synthesis rather than analysis which underlies Eliot’s view of memory in “Preludes” and “Rhapsody” might be Bergsonian, for the French philosopher places “emphasis on memory as the only source of unity in a discrete world” (Gish 3) and points to human consciousness as the faculty which binds successive moments in memory, and is thus an enduring force in a discontinuous world. In this vein, each of Eliot’s two poems “suggests the capacity of consciousness for some insight transcending or unifying the fragmented images of the external world” (Gish 4). And yet, it is interesting to speculate whether the poems are not, on a deeper level, an expression of the symbolist quest for transcendence through a “unification of sensibility” (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 248). Though one might argue that “The Metaphysical Poets” concerns a particular poetic technique rather than the treatment of a particular motif, it must be remembered that to Eliot subject matter and technique are inseparable, and that this convergence is also part of the association of sensibility he argues for. Bergson’s theory is psychological, not poetic, but it is the psychological aspect of poetry that Eliot emphasizes in the very same essay: “One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts” (249).

The symbolist yearning for synthesis seems to underlie, from the very beginning, “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”:

Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations
Its divisions and precisions [...] (*Complete Poems* 14)

The moon seemingly synthesises the disparate elements of the street, uniting separate objects within its glow. However, it soon becomes clear that this unity is only apparent, as the moon is also the force behind the dissolution of memory. As it turns out later in the poem, the moon has perceptions but makes no connections, and in that is opposed to memory, whose chief ability is to connect. “The moon has lost her memory” (15), and hence is incapable of synthesis. It is memory which, in the Bergsonian vein, records and

orders miscellaneous events, as the mention of “clear relations” and “divisions and precisions” suggests. Memory is thus opposed to the moon and the streetlamp as the only real source of unity. The lights of the moon and the lamp present the world in a strange form, as either an unrelated jumble or isolated images, which are unlike the clear relations of daily action memory stores up. Memory is thus the only element in the poem whose role is similar to that played by the metaphysical or symbolist poet, for it too is capable of “amalgamating disparate experience” (*Selected Essays* 247) offering protection against the “chaotic, irregular, fragmentary” (247). It is thanks to memory that “experiences are always forming new wholes” (247). The sight of every object which the street lamp offers for observation stimulates memory, making the speaker think of related objects or events from the past. Memory thus plays an associative function. It does not enable “the ordinary man” to compose poetry, but it makes life possible for him, preventing him from a psychological, if not poetic, “dissociation of sensibility.”

There is, however, another way in which memory functions in Eliot’s poetry, relating him to French symbolism as represented by Nerval. It is the use of the poet’s own memories which he incorporates into his work. It is dangerous to refer to biography in a discussion of Eliot’s *œuvre*, as he, more than anyone, postulates the radical separation of the poet’s life and work. Eliot has a reputation of being a poet who “took the difference between ‘art’ and ‘life’ as axiomatic” (Perloff 46), backed by his famous doctrine of poetic impersonality, whose best expression is perhaps the statement in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “the difference between art and the event is always absolute” (*Selected Essays* 9). Given Eliot’s views on poetic depersonalization, objectivity and universality, as well as his connection with the back-to-the-text New Criticism movement, it seems advisable, in an analysis of his work, to avoid biographical interpretation altogether. Yet several critics of Eliot have been tempted to uncover the man behind the poetry, which results, for instance, in more personalized readings of *The Waste Land* (Moody 47). If not in the totality of his work then definitely in *Four Quartets* Eliot does draw on autobiographical resources, weaving, as does Nerval, elements of his and his family’s past into the rich tapestry of his poetry.

Lagarde and Michard claim that Nerval’s poetry owes its unique nature to its author’s extraordinary fate (272). This transmutation of personal experience into poetry is present in all of Nerval’s work, but it suffices to look at his most famous poem, “El Desdichado,” to see how it works. In the sonnet, the speaker refers to himself as “le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie” (693) (“the Prince of Aquitania whose tower is down”; Fowle 20), which is a fruit of Nerval’s passion for genealogy and the medieval knights whom he claimed to be descended from (Lemaitre 694; Lagarde and Michard 274). In fact, Nerval probably went so far as to identify himself mentally with his chivalrous

ancestors, asking “Suis-je Amour ou Phébus, Lusignan ou Biron?” (693) (“Am I Love or Phoebus, Lusignan or Biron?”; Fowlie 23). His belief in metempsychosis is undoubtedly behind the overall conception of “El Desdichado,” in which history and what he believed was his family’s history merge with Nerval’s own life story. If the eponymous Desdichado is a fusion of a character from Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (Lemaitre 693) and Nerval’s supposed ancestors, “East Coker,” the second of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, owes its title to a village in Somerset from which Eliot’s ancestor Thomas Elyot emigrated to America in the seventeenth century. The poet made a sentimental journey to East Coker in 1937 and prayed in the local church, where his ashes were to be buried and the opening and closing words of “East Coker,” “In my beginning is my end” (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 123) and “In my end is my beginning” (129), were to be inscribed on the commemorative plate (Ackroyd 215, 228-29, 303). In an extension of the life-poem overlap, Eliot also uses a fragment from his ancestor’s book as lines 32-34 of “East Coker,” retaining the original spelling (Longenbach 185). The following is a passage from Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke Named the Governour* incorporated into Thomas Stearns Eliot’s poem:

Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Which betokeneth concorde. (*Complete Poems* 124)

Eliot’s use, in *Four Quartets*, of his family history ranges from distant genealogical references to his childhood memories. In a note accompanying the poem, the author himself explains the title of the third quartet to his readers: “The Dry Salvages – presumably *les trois sauvages* – is a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts” (*Complete Poems* 130). The poem thus starts with a reference to a place associated with the poet’s boyhood sailing trips, and the opening allusion to a river which “is a strong brown god” (130) may be read as referring to the Mississippi of Eliot’s St. Louis childhood. In the poem, other images from Eliot’s early years recur: “the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard” (130) in the first stanza is a reference to the courtyard of the Mary Institute, where he used to play as a child; the “Royal Rose” of part three (134) is the one that grew by his father’s summer home in Gloucester (Ackroyd 13-14, 235-36). The combined memories of holidays and sailing thus recur in “The Dry Salvages,” evoking past happiness and serenity. The title of the quartet which follows, “Little Gidding,” is also an evocation of a journey, but this time made by the adult Eliot in 1936. It is the name of a village in Huntingdonshire in which the seventeenth-century clergyman Nicholas Ferrar set up a religious community which focused

on family life, discipline and prayer (Ackroyd 214-15, 236). Again, the image evokes an ideal of blissful harmony, peace and human cooperation.

In his poetry, Nerval similarly fuses memories of his childhood and adult travels. The opening line of “El Desdichado” condenses the poet’s life in three words: “Je suis le ténébreux, – le veuf, – l’inconsolé” (693) (“I am the dark one, the widower, the unconsolated”; Fowlie 20). He refers to himself as a widower because of having lost the women he loved. The dead star mentioned in line 3 is interpreted as a reference to Sylvie and Adrienne (Lagarde and Michard 274), two female figures who poetically evoke Nerval’s childhood companions and first loves. They also appear in *Sylvie*, a poetic memoir of his early years spent in the Valois region (Lagarde and Michard 271-72), in which Nerval recreates the landscapes of his childhood the way Eliot does in “The Dry Salvages.” “Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine” (“My forehead is still red from the kiss of the queen”; Fowlie 23), another line from “El Desdichado” (Nerval 693), is an evocation of a childish kiss also described in *Sylvie* (Lagarde and Michard 274). The star mentioned in the poem is also associated with Jenny Colon: the actress Nerval fell for in his twenties married another man, died young and became the prototype of the heroine of *Aurélia*, an autobiographical account of the love of Nerval’s life and the obsessions which grew out of this love (Lagarde and Michard 271). In the poet’s memory, all those women merge to become the poet’s eternal beloved, his now dead bride. The second quatrain of the sonnet contains references to Italy and a mysterious female presence:

Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m’as consolé,
Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d’Italie,
La *fleur* qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé,
Et la treille où le pampre à la rose s’allie. (Nerval 693)

In the night of the tomb, you who consoled me,
Give me back Posilippo and the sea of Italy,
The flower that so delighted my desolate heart,
And the trellis where the vine and the rose are entwined. (Fowlie 22)

The consolation Nerval speaks of is a reference to an Englishwoman who comforted the disturbed, suicidal poet during his Italian journey as well as to a Neapolitan embroiderer he encountered (Fowlie 22-23; Lemaitre XLVI). Both are linked, in the poet’s vision, with the image of a rose, the universal symbol of love, but also the flower embroidered by the Neapolitan girl on a religious vestment and the emblem of a town outside Naples where the poet and the Englishwoman arranged to meet.

This geography of the poet's love life makes one think of Eliot's "Burnt Norton." The title of the first quartet is the name of a seventeenth-century estate in Gloucestershire, which Eliot visited in the summer of 1934 with Emily Hale. Eliot had met Hale some two decades earlier. For many years, the poet stayed in touch with her, and the relationship evolved from youthful flirt to close friendship and even, as might be suspected, platonic love. This *amitié amoureuse* remained for Eliot a source of solace and support (Ackroyd 205-6), which might explain why he commemorated it in the title of his poem.

Nerval's poem is replete with autobiographical allusions, which makes it hard to decipher without any knowledge of the poet's biography. Almost every line, every image in the poem is a reference to some significant event in Nerval's life. Even when his memories merge with dreams to create the "souvenir à demi rêvé" ("the half-dreamed memory"; trans. A.P.) Nerval speaks of in *Sylvie* (597), his symbolism and surrealism are, according to Lagarde and Michard, an authentic transcription of the poet's experience, which is far from literary artifice and whose aim to attain a new form of knowledge by analyzing dreams born out of insanity (272). We find the same transcription of the poet's personal experience in *Four Quartets*, though from this particular work by Eliot the oneiric connotations are absent. Both Nerval and Eliot in *Four Quartets* draw on a map of personal reminiscences. In doing so, they write a kind of *poème à clef*, forcing the reader to look for keys to its interpretation. As a result, it is vital to refer to critical notes and commentaries to find out the meanings of vague and hermetic elements in the poem. The authors do not just find inspiration in their own lives, which one could argue most writers do, but create a kind of self-mythology, and, at the same time, make the reader's task more difficult, and the poem's meaning more ambiguous.

Such a use of poetically transcribed personal memories is by no means limiting. In a symbolist and Platonic vein, it allows for the discovery of the universal in the personal, the general in the individual, the multiple in the singular. For Nerval, the poet's memory is timeless, individual past merges with collective past, and the poet's *œuvre* expresses communion with all of human suffering (Lagarde and Michard 272). To paraphrase Eliot in *The Waste Land*, "all the men are one man": the individual experience of one human being comes to stand for all human experiences, a universal expression of man's destiny and condition. Eliot's reference to autobiographical material, particularly frequent in his later works, is not an "un-Eliotesque" departure from his theories of impersonality, but, paradoxically, a Nervalian attempt to unite the microcosm and the macrocosm in a bid to achieve poetic universality. Since in Nerval's case such efforts are based on the French poet's religious and mystical preoccupations, namely his belief in memory, dream and metempsychosis as the sources of timelessness, it comes as no surprise that towards the end of his poetic career Eliot undertakes a parallel venture, following a period of intense

religious experience and reflection. In his well-known essay “The Music of Poetry,” Eliot explains how a poet’s personal experience may be universalized by paralleling the experience of individual readers:

A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant. For instance, the author may have been writing some peculiar personal experience, which he saw quite unrelated to anything outside; yet for the reader the poem may become the expression of a general situation, as well as of some private experience of his own. The reader’s interpretation may differ from the author’s and be equally valid – it may even be better. There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of. (*On Poetry* 31)

The point is that, for both Eliot and Nerval, the “peculiar personal experience” is *not* “unrelated to anything outside”: they realize that the individual encapsulates the general, as the present encompasses the past and the future, due to the universality of the human condition and the timeless, repetitive and paradigmatic patterns of human existence, manifested in metempsychosis and the periodic return of all things. When Eliot and Nerval incorporate the personal into their respective works, they are aware that they thereby express “a general situation,” and the etymology of the word *situation* is emblematic of the religious beliefs underlying their poetic visions. The conclusion of the above-quoted fragment seems to imply this oneness and unity: “The different interpretations may all be partial formulations of one thing” (Eliot, *On Poetry* 31). Eliot’s and Nerval’s tendency to intertwine their life stories with their families’ genealogy is a combination of memory and history, an effort to go beyond time by mixing past and present.

The same power to tame time is inherent in the association of memory with poetic creation, which is central to Eliot’s “La Figlia che Piange,” Rimbaud’s “Mémoire” and Mallarmé’s “Apparition.” One of the key themes in “Mémoire” is that of an abandoned woman. In section four, this motif is combined with memory and regret, with a sense of loss later made explicit in the mention of “Les roses des roseaux dès longtemps dévorées” (Rimbaud 152) (“Roses rise from long-dead reeds”; Mason 130). The solitary woman recalls the passion and sensual delight she used to experience in her lover’s arms:

Regret des bras épais et jeunes d’herbe pure!
Or des lunes d’avril au cœur du saint lit! Joie
des chantiers riverains à l’abandon, en proie
aux soirs d’août qui faisaient germer ces pourritures! (Rimbaud 152)

Longing for strong young grassy arms!
 April's lunar gold, the holy bed's heart!
 Reveling in abandoned boatyards, prey
 To August nights that sow their rot! (Mason 131)

Those memories of a happy past are juxtaposed, in the stanza which follows, with the woman's present despair, as she is depicted crying amid the greenery which once witnessed her bliss. All the key elements in the section – the passage from memory to regret, the figure of a crying, solitary woman alongside references to her lover's painful and irrevocable absence, evocations of the unfulfilled promise inherent in love, beauty and sensuousness, the natural setting – are also present in Eliot's poem. Importantly, what is probably the most significant aspect of "La Figlia che Piange," namely the presence of a third person, the poem's speaker, who looks at the lovers' parting in terms of its artistic potential, endlessly recreating and re-imagining the scene, may be traced back to "Mémoire." Rimbaud's sentence "Qu'elle pleure à présent sous les remparts!" (152) ("Now, let her weep beneath ramparts!"); Mason 131) is an imperative statement. A parallel thus emerges between Rimbaud's phrasing and the overall imperative mood of "La Figlia," in particular the "would" and "should" constructions:

So I would have had him leave,
 So I would have had her stand and grieve,
 So he would have left
 ...
 And I wonder how they should have been together!
 I should have lost a gesture and a pose. (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 20)

The Virgilian epigraph for Eliot's poem, "*O quam te memorem virgo*" (20), which could be translated as "O maiden, how may I recall thee?," points to the role memory plays in "La Figlia." The speaker's recollection of a scene marks the beginning of his attempt to turn this scene into poetry.

It might therefore be argued that the same authorial presence is detectable in both poems, the same desire, on the part of the poet-speaker, to control and transform reality. The notions of time and memory play a crucial role here: while for any individual recollections are a pretext for nostalgically moving between the past and the present, as does the woman in "Mémoire," for the artist they open up unlimited possibilities as the private memory turns into an artistic *tableau*. Memories of what one has seen or experienced are merely a starting point for the creative mind, a source of material which can be

appropriated and endlessly reworked. In the process, reality is as if detemporalized. What the creator ultimately controls is not just reality itself but, first and foremost, the time to which it is subject until it is liberated by being transmuted into art.

In poetry, memory leads to reality becoming secondary and being gradually erased. This is precisely what happens in Mallarmé's "Apparition," another poem of emotional recollection. The image of a lively, joyous girl the speaker runs into in the street gives way to a memory of his late mother. It is a turn away from reality that Mallarmé depicts: a living person is replaced by a dead one, who, moreover, connotes the ethereal by being referred to as a fairy. From the material world embodied by the girl, from the immediacy of the here and now, the poem nostalgically moves to a long-lost and seemingly irretrievable world. Yet it is the latter that triumphs in the speaker's consciousness and in the poem's conclusion: it is because poetry, like memory, can transgress spatial and temporal limitations. Unlike memory, it can also preserve this transgression in a material form. One way or another, the temporal distance, paradoxically, makes it possible to defeat time: in both "La Figlia che Piange" and "Apparition," unfulfilled earthly love is sublimated, through distance in both space and time, into a deeper, more elevated feeling, which is endlessly perpetuated.

Interestingly, both Eliot and the symbolists choose a female figure to symbolise a victory over time: it is so in "La Figlia," in "Mémoire" and in "Apparition." This is also the case with another Mallarmé poem, "Le phénomène futur," which perhaps most emphatically demonstrates the woman-time connection. The eponymous future phenomenon turns out to be a beautiful young woman, who appears before the degenerate inhabitants of a wasteland. The woman is "une Femme d'autrefois" ("a woman of yesteryear"), but "préservée à travers les ans" ("preserved through the years") and thus miraculously immune to the passage of time. Being a "vestige de quelque époque déjà maudite" (269) ("vestige of an already accursed epoch"; trans. A.P.), she survives it and continues her existence beyond the epoch to which she originally belonged. Mallarmé's woman is able to travel in time: having emerged from the past, she is livelier than the degraded present in which she finds herself and, as the very title indicates, points to a future. She is as if stretched between bygone days and the days to come, just as the vertical position of her body seems to indicate a link between the earth, the sea and the sky: "des seins levés comme s'ils étaient pleins d'un lait éternel, la pointe vers le ciel, aux jambes lisses qui gardent le sel de la mer première" (269) ("breasts lifted as if they were filled with eternal milk, pointed at the sky, smooth legs which retain the salt of primeval seas"; trans. A.P.). This perhaps explains why Eliot and the symbolists tend to associate femininity and temporality: to them, woman is the Mother Earth, as primeval and eternal as the elements, a guarantee of temporal continuity and therefore able to bypass time, return to the

origins and connect the end and the beginning. In a self-reflexive vein, Mallarmé concludes that the phenomenal woman of the future is an inspiration to the poets of the present, thereby stressing the poetic dimension of the memory-woman-eternity link: “les poètes de ces temps, sentant se rallumer leurs yeux éteints, s’achemineront vers leur lampe, le cerveau ivre un instant d’une gloire confuse, hantés du Rythme et dans l’oubli d’exister à une époque qui survit à la beauté” (270) (“the poets of those days, feeling their extinct eyes light up again will head for their lamps, their minds momentarily drunk with confused glory, haunted by Rhythm and existing in the oblivion of an epoch which survives beauty”; trans. A.P.). The realms of poetry and memory overlap because inherent in both is a desire for transcendence and liberation from the limitations imposed by space and time.

In Eliot’s and the symbolists’ poetic vision, memory becomes another means of transcending temporal constraints. At this point, Bergson’s philosophy is relevant, but so is Eliot’s appreciation of associative sensibility, which the French symbolist poets exemplify for him. The power of memory to associate, synthesize and unite is particularly valuable in a fragmentary, disintegrating world, which leads Eliot to poetically realize Bergson’s philosophy in a symbolist vein. Following Nerval’s example, the author of *Four Quartets* uses his own memories and family history in his work. Drawing on autobiographical resources, which are transcribed and transmuted into poetry, Eliot and Nerval evoke the bliss and harmony of childhood and the splendor of the past. More importantly, by incorporating into their works allusions which are virtually impossible to decipher without knowledge of their biographies, the two poets create a kind of self-mythology and succeed in making their poems vague and hermetic. This anamnestic practice is part of the Platonic-symbolist endeavor to discover the universal and the general in the personal and the individual, thereby evoking the timelessness of the human paradigm. Eliot and the symbolists mix past and present and bypass time by combining memory and history as well as memory and poetic creation. The artist uses memories as material and is able to control and stop time. What unites memory and poetry is the power to recreate, transform and detemporalize reality. Like memory, art enables liberation from time and, unlike memory, it preserves it in a material form.

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