

Yielding to the Illusions of Reality: A Žižekian Approach to Selected Works of Robert Southey

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Abstract

This research paper undertakes an examination of four of Southey's selected works: "To Horror," "The Race of Banquo," "Ode, Written During the Negotiations with Bonaparte," and "Wat Tyler." It further investigates the relationship between each poem and its historical context, while offering valuable perspectives on the inherent fallacies of Romanticism. The study reveals the features of Romantic ideology and meaning in the poet's works, and then attempts to highlight the reason for his political shift by applying psychoanalysis and Slavoj Žižek's theories. In contrast to the prevailing notion that Southey betrayed revolutionary ideals and abandoned the promised era of freedom and justice that the French Revolution ushered in, the paper, agreeing with scholars admitting this continuity, maintains that his regard for the people still remained with him. Moreover, this analysis leads to the conclusion that Southey's transition to conservatism was an attempt to avert the complete disintegration of the Symbolic Order and rationalize the Revolution's failure, thereby implying that a utopia could be realized on Earth if the proper 'obstacles' are removed. Adopting such a gesture confirms his status as a genuine Romantic ideologue.

Keywords: Robert Southey, Ideology, Romanticism, The French Revolution, The Symbolic Order, The Real, Fantasy.

Introduction

“He is a man of virtue, he never will belie what he thinks” (Madden, 2002 p. 154). Shelley penned this description for a poet who was born in Bristol, England, on August 12, 1774, and subsequently rose to prominence as a member of the Romantic literary movement in the early 19th century: Robert Southey. Leading the Romantic era in epic poetry, Southey distinguished himself by examining and contrasting many cultural landscapes through the use of massive themes of battle and conquest; his major works explored the rich and complicated history of Islamic civilization while also tapping into the difficulties of medieval Christendom (Tucker, 2003). Herbert F. Tucker further affirms that in addition to the exotic and magical lands of Hindustan, Southey’s epic works portrayed the tensions and exchanges between British colonial forces and native Indian traditions, and pointed out the resistance of the indigenous peoples of the New World against European colonists by bringing to life their rich traditions and violent histories (2003). Nevertheless, this poet who depicted such creative talent was not only severely ridiculed in his own day for his shifts but also ignored for over a century – i.e., until the end of the twentieth century (Pratt and Fulford, 2008).

During his early years as a poet, Southey passionately supported the French Revolution, praising its fundamental tenets of freedom, equality, and brotherhood (Raimond, 1989). His literary works, most famously “Joan of Arc” (1796), an epic poem honoring the revolutionary spirit by means of the courageous story of the French national heroine who battled against tyranny, clearly capture this enthusiasm of his. Similar revolutionary energy is channeled by the poet in “Wat Tyler” (1794), a dramatic poem influenced by the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, which emphasizes the fight against repressive feudal structures and promotes social fairness and reform. Southey thus depicted his faith in overthrowing the long-established systems of privilege and power through an intense antagonism to the monarchy and a strong support of revolutionary change. However, it is believed that Southey was deeply disillusioned by the excesses of the Terror, the time of extreme violence and persecution during the French Revolution, which was a major factor in his extreme ideological departure from radicalism to conservatism (Raimond, 1989). That is to say, Southey was persuaded by the widespread executions, prevailing violence, and betrayal of revolutionary principles that this kind of upheaval produced chaos rather than the idealistic society he and his peers had imagined. Combining with personal experiences, British political developments, and a mounting doubt about the prospects of revolutionary change, such factors drove him towards a more conservative stance (*ibid*). Unlike others like Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose political directions likewise changed from radicalism to conservatism, Southey came under especially severe criticism and was dubbed a “turncoat” (McGann, 1983, p. 142) by those who saw his change as a betrayal to his earlier ideals. Notwithstanding disputes and swings in critical reception over the years, his creative vision and dedication to exploring the complexities of human affairs have influenced succeeding generations of writers and poets. As mentioned above, Southey has been referred to as a poet who committed a “political ‘apostasy,’” (O’Hanlon-Alexandra, 2022, p. 3). However, an alternative perspective on the poet’s supposed apostasy is provided by David M. Craig in his study of Southey’s political leanings. The analysis he conducted reveals that Southey switched to conservatism as a tool to enable him to carry out his intentions of creating a perfect society (Craig, 2007). Agreeing with Craig, our reading of his writings attempts to illustrate that, despite changes in his political stances, whether or not sincere, he remained truly an ideologue throughout the course of his career. In order to do this, the paper will first concentrate on the Romantic Ideology at play in a selection of his writings, comprising a variety of poetic pieces and a drama: “To Horror,” “The Race of Banquo,” “Ode, Written During the Negotiations with Bonaparte,” and “Wat Tyler.”

Then, by employing Žižek’s theories and principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely ideology, symbolic order, and the Real, as a guiding framework, our objective is to reveal the underlying dynamics of the Romantic ideology found in Southey’s writings. Through this approach, we seek to provide new perspectives and interpretations that enhance our comprehension of this notable figure in Romantic literature, concluding that his disappointment with the outcomes of the French Revolution did not cause him to abandon his quest to transform society. That is to say, the poet did not accept the inherent lack and the ultimately phantasmic and unattainable nature of his grand Romantic cause, but instead, he sought to rationalize the failure of the revolutionary movement in France, the country that once promised a bright future for the peoples of the world.

Southey’s Works and Romanticism

Romanticism is a concept that defies easy definition. Numerous individuals have made efforts to grasp its fundamental qualities, although its complex and diverse character renders it a difficult notion to define precisely.¹ Romanticism, an artistic and literary movement that originated in the latter part of the eighteenth century, includes a wide range of philosophies, themes, and styles. The term appears to defy a singular, straightforward definition precisely due to this

¹ Cf. Arthur O. Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms;” M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*; Isaiah Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*; Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*.

very variety in its characteristics among wordsmiths of the period. The term is defined by Isaiah Berlin in light of the revolutionary sentiments prevalent in the period's literature (1999). According to his argument, it can be said that liberty, equality, and fraternity, the guiding principles of the French Revolution, strongly influenced Romantic literature (*ibid*). These concepts, which reflected a fundamental yearning for social change and individual liberty, found their way into the poetry and prose of the Romantic era. Hence, one may interpret the movement as a literary manifestation of the more extensive revolutionary values that dominated Europe throughout this period. M.H. Abrams outlines a number of characteristics that are frequently observed among the preeminent Romantic poets. Abrams asserts that Romantic poets frequently defied conventional standards and rules, in both content and structure. The literary works portrayed protagonists who personified a spirit of resistance and rebellion against the limitations of human society, adhering to change and transformation (Abrams, 2015). While the Enlightenment prioritized reason and order, this new movement departed by praising the sublime and the emotional and placing an emphasis on individualism (*ibid*).

Briefly, Romanticism was characterized by a stress on the subjective experience of the individual, a strong desire for individual liberty and equality, and a critical examination of the injustices of society. As they fought for a society that valued each person for who they were, romantics aimed to bring attention to the injustices of their day. A significant admiration for the splendor and power of nature, a yearning for personal and political emancipation, and a determination to surpass the constraints imposed by society were recurring themes in their works. All of these ideas come together to form the Romantic ideology, which has had a lasting impact on literature and society. It is now appropriate to examine the selected literary pieces created by Robert Southey in order to identify the aforementioned characteristics that have been emphasized as facets of this movement's mindset, beginning with "To Horror" (1791).

"Dark Horror! hear my call!" (l.1). As the poem begins, the poet summons the 'horror' personified. He goes further to portray Horror as a "stern", lonely creature who lives in an unsettling, desolate "retreat" (l.2). In the stanza, 'Horror' takes delight in the almost-complete darkness of midnight, listening to the "roar of waters" and "the deep, dull groan / Of some perturbed sprite" carried on "the heavy gales of night" (ll.6-11). This powerful imagery sets the tone for the poem by creating an atmosphere of terror. Reading on, one is confronted with several kinds of terror, or several other dreadful conditions, that were present during the poet's day. Emphasizing the harshness of nature, the second stanza depicts a lost traveler's lonely experience during a winter storm (ll.12-17). This stanza's use of "winter" and "snow", along with other instances in the rest of the poem that connote 'coldness', evokes images of the world as lifeless and bleak (ll.16-17). For example, the poem vividly depicts the tragic fate of "some wreck'd mariner" (l.20) on the icy, bear-infested Greenlandic coasts, highlighting the threats and challenges of traveling to hostile places and surviving there. The poet also captures the "strange delight" (l.29) of 'Horror' as it, in its "fury form" (l.25), witnesses a tall ship trapped in "dark-wing'd tempests" (l.27) as it watches the ship sink in the midst of lightning and raging sea – an instance of humankind's impotence in the face of the sublime power of nature. The poem also depicts other terrifying situations of the time, such as a battlefield where disease and death have spread across the landscape and ravens' haunting cries have added to the misery; a defeated army with wounded soldiers left to die in the snow; and a mother and child frozen in the snow. Lastly, Southey describes the horrors of slavery, imagining the tormented life of an impaled slave and praying for the rise of the oppressed to exercise justice and punishment for the oppressors. In general terms, the poem portrays the oppressive circumstances of the poet's era, criticizing the severe realities that existed and expressing a passionate desire for the oppressed to be liberated. Hence, it is evident that the entire poem is dominated by the ideals of Romantic ideology, which championed liberty and justice for the wronged subjects of established institution. The period is a time of dread and anguish resulted from hundreds of years of oppression, and extreme measures are required for the people to emancipate themselves.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Fleance—the son of Banquo—and his father are pursued by assassins sent by Macbeth. Southey's "The Race of Banquo" (1793) recounts Fleance's struggles in that scene as he escapes from the killers. Banquo begs his son to flee, and he himself remains to face the villains alone at the beginning of the poem. Driven by his father's pleas and fueled by terror, Fleance sprints through a dark and rainy night. Thrilling screams, moans, and the appearance of supernatural witches fill the night as he runs away. The voices that keep telling Fleance to rush away are terrifying, so he prays for protection against them. At the end of the incomplete poem, a prophetic voice appears, addressing Fleance as the "Parent of the sceptred race" (l.21) and telling him to accept his fate as the ancestor of kings. While Europe was experiencing great social and political turmoil, Southey penned this poem in 1793. Destiny, power, and a clash of people against greater forces are common themes this poem, which were shaped by the French Revolution and its aftermath. The vivid and powerful atmosphere created by Southey's excellent use of language and images engages the audience in Fleance's struggle to survive. "Fly, son of Banquo! Fleance, fly!" (ll.1, 8, 9, and 20) is a haunting refrain that expresses the urgency and persistent pressure of his flight through the poem's repeating form. Not only do the "Loathly night-hags" (l.13) bring an extra dimension of gothic fear to the piece, but their very presence suggests the presence of a greater, unidentified force. The suffocating environment, tyrannical antagonists in power, and supernatural elements are all exhausting factors that make the solitary Fleance's struggle

for survival even more challenging, evoking parallels with the difficulties that radicals encountered during the early stages of the French Revolution's political unrest and struggle for liberty. According to the context of the poem, the difficult circumstances and the gloomy atmosphere are merely the outcomes of prolonged periods of injustice and oppression enacted by the unworthy rulers.

In 1817, those against him pirated his unpublished "Wat Tyler" to expose his 'turncoat' character after he supposedly abandoned his radical views and assumed a more conservative attitude. Contemporary debates over the proper use of force during revolutions and the ethical difficulties of political insurrection are addressed in this closet drama, which deals with topics of political turmoil and justified violence (Haywood, 2004). Basically, the work appears to be a cry for the oppressed and the fight for social justice. Speaking for the common people, Wat Tyler boldly expresses their issues. As an example, Tyler raises doubts about the value of monarchy in the first act of the play:

What matters me who wears the crown of France?
 Whether a Richard or a Charles possess it?
 They reap the glory—they enjoy the spoil—
 We pay—we bleed!—The sun would shine as cheerly,
 The rains of heaven as seasonably fall,
 Tho' neither of these royal pests existed. (Southey, 1817, p. 6)

The feudal system was unjust, as the common people suffered while the privileged prospered (as depicted in the quote). This exemplifies the passion for change that characterized the latter half of the 18th century, specifically the impact of the French Revolution. That revolution promoted for the establishment of egalitarian societies and the removal of tyrannical regimes. As previously stated and deduced from the quotation, Southey was sympathetic to these revolutionary ideals during his youth, supporting the rights of the common people and criticizing the injustices committed by the privileged ones. The established authority and the inherent corruption of the governing class are both subject to critique in the play. Tyler's disapproval of the court's extravagance draws attention to the systemic exploitation that the government enforces: "who should pay for / The luxuries and riots of the court? / Who should support the flaunting courtier's pride, / Pay for their midnight revels, their rich garments, / Did not the state enforce?" (Southey, 1817, p. 7) This point of view serves as a representation of the opposition to arbitrary authority and a call for responsibility and equality. Early revolutionary passion is emphasized in Southey's depiction of the rebels as morally deserving of their cause; this passion calls into question the legitimacy of traditional institutions and urges for radical change in systems.

Another theme that runs through the play is the importance of solidarity in social revolutions. One might even argue that the dissatisfied citizens of the kingdom's most terrifying weapon is their togetherness. The king, in the play, is not afraid of a single man; he is not afraid of the power of Wat Tyler as a man or a leader: "I dread their fury", confesses the king (Southey, 1817, p. 36). It is "their" fury, the wrath and strength of the peasants' very union, that makes the highest ranking member of the authority chain tremble. The men of the king are similarly mindful of this fact; therefore, they propose, "divide them, / And they will fall an easy sacrifice" (*ibid*). Accordingly, this type of collective resistance against oppression stresses the vital significance of unity among the people in order to challenge and deconstruct established power structures; Southey indirectly encourages the wronged to unite and rise up against tyranny by employing this notion in his work. What then happens to transform this radical soul into an ardent conservative?

Southey and the Real of the Reality

Much effort has been devoted to resolving the matter. Raimond, for example, attributes this transition to the "excesses of the Terror" and "several other factors" (1989). However, Jonathan Taylor (2019) argues that Southey's revolutionary spirit had considerably diminished by 1793, predating the Terror, in contrast to Raimond's assertions. Taylor maintains that Southey's early conviction that tyranny was a recurring blockage to democracy caused him to doubt the viability of revolution's success (*ibid*), in contrast, again, to Raimond and others who contend that his disgust at the excesses of the Terror influenced his eventual shift to conservatism (1989). There are yet other studies that provide a more enlightening viewpoint for the scholars of Romanticism. For instance, Craig has highlighted the remarkable similarities between Southey's 'radical' views in the 1790s and his subsequent conservatism in the 1820s, according to Gavin Budge (2011). Further demonstrating the continuity of Southey's concerns for the people, David Eastwood explains the poet's worries regarding the catastrophic "consequences of growing extremes of wealth" (1989). That is to say, "the well-being of the poor" continued to preoccupy Southey (*ibid*). Why, if he continued to be concerned with the welfare of the people, did he abandon his reforming campaign? What motivated his opposition to the proponents of revolution? Our analysis of the poet's "Ode, Written During the Negotiations with Bonaparte" (1814) will provide answers to the issues put forth.

Southey's ode powerfully condemns tyranny, with specific emphasis on the authoritarian rule of the emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte. As the oppressed are presented with a chance for deliverance, the first stanza begins by condemning any demand for peace at this critical moment. The author draws a parallel between the growing tide of Vengeance and a flood "no longer now to be repress 'd" (ll.4-5), implying that retribution is necessary due to the accumulated injustices and innocent bloodshed. This flood imagery suggests that revenge is an inevitable and natural process, and that justice must not be postponed any longer. "Europe throws off the yoke abhor'd" (l.12) highlights the united front of nations brought together under the banners of freedom and ancient laws, all resisting the tyrannical restraints of Napoleon, demonstrating a concerted attempt to destroy his oppressive rule. Further in the poem, the poet contends, "Woe, woe to England! woe and endless shame, / If this heroic land, / False to her feelings and unspotted fame, / Hold out the olive to the Tyrant's hand" (ll.15-18). Southey warns England immediately that the country will suffer severely if it makes peace with the emperor. He contends that affirming Bonaparte's rule would damage moral clarity because it would force society to reframe unlawful conduct in courtly terms, making the notions of Right and Wrong meaningless (ll.21-25). When describing Napoleon as a godless tyrant who wears the panoply of hell and acknowledges no rule save his own will, Southey's discourse gets ever more violent:

For all too long in blood had he been nursed,
And ne'er was earth with verier tyrant cursed
Bold man and bad.
Remorseless, godless, full of fraud and lies,
And black with murders and with perjuries,
Himself in Hell's whole panoply lie clad;
No law but his own headstrong will he knew,
No counsellor but his own wicked heart.
From evil thus portentous strength he drew,
And trampled under foot all human ties,
All holy laws, all natural charities. (ll.51-61)

Under Napoleon's reign, France was an impoverished nation marked by disgrace, plunder, bloodshed, and indescribable wrongdoings as described by the poet. He urges the nations and the countless slain to demand a punishment from France for the crimes that were perpetrated during Napoleon's reign. Southey addresses France by name, pleading for her to see the truth and seek revenge for herself and all of humanity. From the slaughter at Jaffa to the carnage in Spain and Russia, he details the horrific acts committed by Napoleon and demands vengeance for the innocent blood that was shed as well as the villain's own "private guilt" (l.139) for all of it. Generally speaking, the ode is a harsh critique of authoritarianism, namely the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte. He paints Napoleon as an abomination who must face the consequences of his crimes through the use of intense imagery and strong words. A Europe scarred by tyranny longs for moral clarity, and Southey's cry for justice and retribution echoes that long.

Hoping to bring about a utopian society similar to the one he envisioned and planned with Coleridge, the earlier, radical Southey yearned for a shift in the order of things. Even in their *Fall of Robespierre* (1794), Southey paints Robespierre as the one who overthrew despotism. Yet, as previously mentioned, the poet's primary concern was the welfare of the people, and he would criticize any action that jeopardized that welfare as a whole (Budge 2011; Eastwood 1989). In contrast to its initial objective of emancipating the oppressed, the Revolution introduced an era characterized by unparalleled cruelty and tyranny. In fact, the destruction of the traditional power structure increased oppression and instability rather than fostering a utopian society. From the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory, the utopian society envisioned by Southey and Coleridge had always been already unattainable. To clarify this assertion, it is necessary to take into account the manner in which an individual becomes a neurosis (i.e., a normal person) upon entering the Symbolic Order.

For the subject to come into being, a fundamental lack must be produced; this lack, while illusory, assures a re-appropriation of the unattainable *jouissance*, which was sacrificed when the symbolization of the real occurred via the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father. This ontologically constitutive lack fuels the neurotic's habit of always implying something about their connection to the Other. When faced with the incomprehensible "abyss of the desire of the Other" with no means of consolation, the subject might turn to fantasy—in the strict Lacanian sense—as a means of avoiding the inherent inconsistencies and antagonism present in the symbolic order (Žižek, 2008a, 132). Thus, neurotics rely heavily on fantasy, which allows them to satisfy their desires by following the signifier's proper objects through the never-ending metonymic movement, presuming that the Other possesses the answer. For the subject to function effectively within the Symbolic Order, the ontological status of the void or lack must, in fact, remain unknown. Therefore, the subject's desire is formed by fantasy, which de-ontologizes the lack and introduces a presumed *lost object*, giving them the illusion that the loss may be mended. At this specific stage, fantasy attains a transcendental status in relation to the inaccessible object of desire, which neither exists in reality nor is positive. "we search in vain for it in positive reality," Žižek explains, "because it has no positive consistency – because it is just an

objectification of a void.” (Žižek, 2008a, 104). In other words, “a fantasy,” Žižek maintains, “constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally ‘teaches us how to desire’.” (Žižek, 2008b, 7). Fantasy, so to speak, provides the fallacy that it is possible to discover the ideal object to occupy the inherent emptiness.

Southey and Coleridge acknowledged that the common people had been subjected to centuries of oppression and that there was neither liberty nor equality within the ancient order of things that ruled the whole world. Thereby, the widespread political unrest of that era ignited their desire for a fundamental change in the order of the world. And the humanitarian ideals of the Romantic ideology further fueled that desire in the heart of the people. What follows is a way for one to look at the era’s ideological promises: ‘in our time, a Revolution has become realizable that has the potential to liberate all peoples, unify them as fellow human beings under one united banner, and grant every individual the chance to determine their own destiny.’ In this way, the concept of Revolution became a sublime object—a regular object that is only bestowed with value that it truly lacks—of the Romantic ideology. “[The] ‘sublime object of ideology’ is the spectral object which has no positive ontological consistency, but merely fills in the gap of a certain constitutive impossibility” (Žižek, 1992). The sublimed notion of Revolution promised justice, equality, and freedom, but when the world saw the brutality of the Jacobins and the rise of Bonaparte’s empire, which included the reintroduction of slavery, the idea of “Revolution” as a noble goal with all its connotations was brought down and criticized. That is to say, the once revolutionary sympathizers came to realize the inevitable failure of revolutionary acts. They were disillusioned regarding the notion of Revolution and the ideal it advocated. This very failure of the movement and the ultimate disillusionment of its supporters should have made Southey aware that there is always an antagonism within the very heart of the Symbolic Order, i.e., the reality. His approach to the situation, however, was anything but this. The sublime object of Southey’s ideology changed. As Žižek puts it, “fantasy constitutes what we call reality: the most common bodily ‘reality’ is constituted via a detour through the cobweb of fantasy. In other words, we pay a price to gain access to ‘reality’: something—the real of the trauma—must be ‘repressed’” (1993, pp. 117-118). Fantasy, for Southey, provided a remedy for the traumatic kernel of the human societies, that the inherent antagonism of the social world cannot be overcome and it always returns, if repressed, in another form. The monarchy was uprooted to repress the antagonism; however, the repressed antagonism returned in a more violent form through the Reign of Terror and Bonaparte’s empire. Instead of accepting the ontological status of the antagonism, Southey elevated the likes of the Jacobins and Bonaparte to the status of a sublime object. At a time when the Symbolic Order was close to destruction and a darker force was conquering the world, Southey decided to save the present order through this shift in the sublime object of his ideology. Accordingly, the realization of a utopian society is not truly impossible to him, but it is people like Bonaparte, the “Remorseless, godless, full of fraud and lies” (*Ode*, 1.54), that block the path to the realization of that glorious dream: One man hath been for ten long, wretched years / The cause of all this blood and all these tears” (*Ode*, ll.86-7). The unfortunate bloodshed is “The Villain’s own peculiar, private guilt” (*Ode*, 1.139).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the violent occurrences of Robert Southey’s time, especially the Reign of Terror and Napoleon’s ascent, can be viewed through the viewpoint of his reaction, which led him to become more conservative, but not really betraying the ideals that clouded his thoughts. This conservative shift of his has been the subject of debate among academics; some say it was an immediate response to the Terror, while others say it was more gradual and started prior to the very Terror. Another view holds that Southey did not completely give up on his utopian dream of a better society since there are similarities in his early and later writings. Our findings show that the genuine fear of a more sinister force annihilating society in general, with all its values and traditions, was what really motivated Southey’s conservatism. That is to say, supporting the existing order satisfied his need for stability and his strong dislike of any further violence. Because he thought it was crucial for human society to have a set of regulations, customs, and ethics in place to safeguard people from falling apart and the Symbolic Order from destruction, he discarded and condemned revolutionary, radical acts in an effort to sustain the existing Symbolic Order. That is, to protect civilization from absolute power and disorder, Southey took a conservative position, which was beyond simply a rejection of revolutionary changes. In light of this, despite what his critics call him, a “turncoat” with a shifting nature, Southey is what Shelley calls him, “a man of virtue” (Madden, 2002), or a true Romantic *ideologue*. Instead of accepting the inherent, traumatic lack of the system, the perpetual antagonism of the social life and accordingly, the impossibility of creating a perfect society, the poet identifies Bonaparte as the obstacle blocking the path to the realization of this goal. This standpoint, in essence, is not different from that of the French revolutionaries. Similarly, they perceived the monarchy as the origin of hostility and injustice, believing that removing it could open the way to equality, justice, and freedom, only to be disillusioned when a second lieutenant ascended to the seat of power as an emperor, bringing war and more bloodshed to the nations.

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