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Cixin Liu's *The Remembrance of Earth's Past*Trilogy: The End of All Things

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Summary

The present paper is the third in the series of articles devoted to the selected aspects of a modern science fiction genre variant that has previously been approximated as 'the space opera of a great crisis,' the remaining two publications being: 'Trylogia Wspomnienie o przeszłości Ziemi Cixina Liu: w poszukiwaniu kontekstów interpretacyjnych' [Cixin Liu's The Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy: In Search of Interpretative Grounds] and 'Mariaż dwóch światów: quasi-chrześcijańska wizja ewolucji człowieka i kosmosu w Pieśniach Hyperiona Dana Simmonsa' [The Marriage of Two Worlds: A Quasi-Christian Vision of the Evolution of the Universe and Humanity in Dan Simmons' Hyperion Cantos]. The paper first provides a summary of the previous discussion, especially the modified description of the key generic traits of 'the space opera of a great crisis,' and then conducts a more detailed, comparative analysis of the two representative and essential, yet contrasting achievements of the genre in question: Liu's trilogy The Remembrance of Earth's Past and Simmon's tetralogy Hyperion Cantos, in respect to the worldviews that inform them, respectively, as well as their narrative structures. It is suggested that the narrative structures of both works are considerably influenced by their respective worldviews and that, paradoxically, the apparently crude and simple narration of The Remembrance of Earth's Past may be viewed as a conscious literary operation aimed at enhancing the trilogy's message. Thus, (contrary to many previous critical opinions) Liu's work proves to be not only a major extrapolative achievement but also an interesting artistic one.

The present paper is the third in the series of articles devoted to selected aspects of a modern science-fiction genre variant that has previously been approximated as 'the space opera of a great crisis,' the remaining two being: 'Trylogia Wspomnienie o przeszłości Ziemi Cixina Liu: w poszukiwaniu kontekstów interpretacyjnych' [Cixin Liu's The Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy: In Search of Interpretative Grounds]¹ and 'Mariaż dwóch światów: quasi-chrześcijańska wizja ewolucji człowieka i kosmosu w Pieśniach Hyperiona Dana Simmonsa' [The Marriage of Two Worlds: A Quasi-Christian Vision of the Evolution of the Universe and Humanity in Dan Simmons' Hyperion Cantos].²

As my current paper is a direct continuation of the first of the articles mentioned above, I will briefly summarize statements and proposals included therein.

In the initial article I introduced the contemporary Chinese science-fiction writer Cixin Liu and discussed his extraordinary international status as an emerging SF star as well as the notable critical reception of his greatest work up-to-date — The Remembrance Of Earth's Past, which very quickly achieved the status of a canonical SF work worldwide. Subsequently, I briefly summarized the complex and multi-layered plot of the trilogy, at the same time referring to the conventions of 'the space opera of a great crisis.' Finally, I proposed slightly different interpretative grounds than those that are usually applied in the discussions of Liu's trilogy. Firstly, I suggested a comparative analysis of certain selected aspects of *The* Remembrance Of Earth's Past and, arguably, a quintessential work of 'the space opera of a great crisis,' Dan Simmons' Hyperion Cantos.⁴ Secondly, I observed that the very construction of the plot and characters in Liu's epic, generally regarded by the critics as relatively pretextual, unsophisticated and almost completely subordinated to the presentation of cognitive ideas in the text, might, in fact, be more significant than it appears to be at first sight. I hope to join both these research threads in my present discussion.

Before I start, let me recapitulate the main features of 'the space opera of a great crisis,' implementing several modifications to my previous description:

¹ G. Trębicki, 'Trylogia *Wspomnienie o przeszłości ziemi* Cixina Liu: w poszukiwaniu kontekstów interpretacyjnych', [in:] *W kręgu zagadnień literatury powszechnej*, eds. R. Kotowski, I. Mityk, Kielce 2007, pp. 215–228.

² G. Trębicki, 'Mariaż dwóch światów: quasi-chrześcijańska wizja ewolucji człowieka i kosmosu w *Pieśniach Hyperiona* Dana Simmonsa', *Ethos* 36, 2023, no. 4 (144), pp. 107–123.

³ From now on abbreviated as ROEP. The trilogy comprises three volumes: 三体, published originally in China in 2006 and translated in 2014 into English as *A Three Bodied Problem* and in 2017 into Polish as *Problem trzech ciał*; 黑暗森林, published originally in China in 2008 and translated in 2015 into English as *The Dark Forest* and in 2017 into Polish as *Ciemny las*; and, finally, 死神永生, published originally in China in 2010 and translated in 2016 into English as *Death's End* and in 2018 into Polish as *Koniec śmierci*. Interestingly (and perhaps regrettably), Polish versions were not translated directly from Chinese but from English.

⁴ The Hyperion Cantos (henceforward abbreviated as HC) is divided into two dilogies, the first one comprising Hyperion (1989) and Fall of Hyperion (1990) and the second Endymion (1996) and The Rise of Endymion (1997).

- 1. Presentation of humanity on the verge of a great crisis (civilizational or technological, with major social, psychological or even ontological implications) or a threat (motifs of, for example, disaster on a cosmic scale, contact/clash with an alien civilization or an artificial intelligence).
- 2. Well-discernible and earnest (not only pretextual or purely 'scenographical') references to recent scientific theory, especially cosmology and quantum physics. It must be emphasized that the ambition of the authors here is usually to propose in a manner of speaking a 'total' and 'realistic' speculation, in other words, to present a relatively holistic, multidimensional and coherent vision, often concerning the very nature of the universe and the evolution of humankind, which, while being only a literary extrapolation, is, nevertheless, compatible and consistent with contemporary scientific research (from which it draws its main inspiration), and (at least theoretically) in certain aspects might, in fact, prove true. Such vision is not merely a literary game, but rather a serious intellectual undertaking, an ambitious attempt to deal with the most fundamental questions.
- 3. The creation of the fictional universe on a spectacular scale; description of large vistas of known and unknown space and multitude of star systems; introducing chronology that spans over tens, hundreds or even thousands of years.
- 4. The introduction of eschatological and ontological motifs re-interpreted not in religious or para-religious but rather strictly rational, scientific paradigm (although in some text efforts to unite both paradigms surface).⁵
- 5. Presentation of a multitude of characters and points of view, more or less relevant to the fictional events; in more recent texts of this genre variation an emphasis is put on a reliable psychological motivation of these characters.
- 6. Taking the structure of a multi-volume novel, which in an obvious way is caused by the scope of the fictional universe and the narrated events.
 - 7. More or less optimistic resolution of the crisis at the end of the text.
- 8. Preserving more or less emphasized the convention of a classical adventure sci-fi novel with charismatic protagonists, easy for the implied readers to identify with, who after paying a greater or lesser price finally overcome the hardships and are instrumental in reaching the positive conclusion mentioned above.

As it has been suggested, the *Hyperion Cantos* by Dan Simmons may be viewed as a quintessential text of this genre variant and, perhaps, one of its greatest achievements (if not the greatest one). I have discussed at some length the plot and main premises of the novel in 'Mariaż dwóch światów...,' so at this point I will only emphasize the elements especially relevant for my present argument.

1. In conformity to the space opera tradition the plot (and similarly as in Liu's trilogy) spans over several hundred years, moves through the multitude of star systems and engages a large group of characters.

⁵ See my discussion in 'Mariaż dwóch światów...'.

2. Still in conformity with the above conventions (and to some extent differently than in *ROEP*) narration follows the convention of adventurous space-opera, also emphasizing dramatic tensions between the characters. The plot is also shaped by the mythopoeic patterns that usually clearly manifest themselves in non-mimetic literature (for example, the motif of a quest, motifs of initiation and spiritual transformation of the protagonists, references to Campbellian hero's journey, dramatic confrontations with antagonists, etc.).⁶ The very ending offers a very meaningful Eucatostrophe — consolation — in a very Tolkienesque fashion.⁷

- 3. The *Cantos* relate humanity's struggle against the artificial intelligences of the TechnoCore which first evolved in symbiosis with human civilization but then turned against humans, attempting to manipulate and control them in order to parasitize on them. Narration especially focuses on the conception and life of Aenea, daughter of a human woman and a Cybrid (an entity resulting from the fusion of an artificial intelligence's consciousness with a human body, directly connected to the TechnoCore). Aenea becomes a messianic, Christ-like figure whose final sacrifice and martyrdom enables the victory over the TechnoCore.
- 4. HC extensively refers to modern cosmology and quantum physics but also to philosophy and theology (especially the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin and his concept of 'Omega point'). Thus, tetralogy may be viewed as an ambitious attempt to unite the scientific and the para-religious paradigms by re-interpretations of religious ideas in scientific, rational terms. Ultimately, the element of 'transcendence' usually associated with strictly religious thinking gains scientific validation and is explained as, in fact, a 'physical' element of the structure of the universe.
- 5. At the end of the last volume, thanks to Aenea's sacrifice, humanity gains access to 'the Void which Binds' (or in scientific terminology 'Planck Space') a benevolent quantum space permeating the whole universe which unifies all existence and stores the 'echoes' of every consciousness that ever existed. Although

⁶ The mythopoeic patterns in non-mimetic literature are probably most easily observed and have been most extensively discussed by critics and scholars in relation to the genre of secondary world fantasy, but they also underlie the structure of many notable SF works.

⁷ Eucatastrophe, the term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien in his famous essay 'On Fairy Tales' ([in:] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, Unwin, London 1964) can be described as a sudden turn of the plot, a happy ending bringing joy and consolation. This concept has been especially well discussed and explained by Marek Oziewicz in his seminal work on mythopoeic fantasy (*One Earth, One People: The Mythopeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, NC–London 2008): '[T]he plot of mythopoeic fantasy must end happily. Yet throughout, and even when the story approaches its conclusion, the failure is presented as a more probable outcome; the odds are too great and there are few hints that things will end well. In those circumstances, when the happy end comes it has quality of a eucatastrophe: a wished for though extremely improbable and difficult to imagine miraculous deliverance; a turn of events which gives rise to a sense of joy not unlike the joy or religious revelation' (p. 87). The very ending of *The Rise of Endymion* offers, perhaps, one of the most powerful and meaningful eucatastrophes in SF, if not in the whole non-mimetic literature. The text executes it without, apparently, compromising the verisimilitude of the plot or the coherence of the presented world model, which even further seems to enhance this operation.

TechnoCore tries to manipulate this space, destroying it at the same time, the true control over it (as Aenea reveals) can only be achieved with empathy and love. Mastering it enables, for example, unlimited and instant travel and communication even on cosmic distances as 'a quantum wave of probabilities.'

- 6. Thus, the novel describes humanity's ascent to the higher level of existence and offers a holistic, coherent vision of the evolution of cosmic civilization as well as the whole universe including the elements of what may be called 'cosmic sociology' (in which it is again analogous to *ROEP*, although both visions differ strikingly).
- 7. Contrarily to *ROEP*, the universe is described not as a hostile but rather a benevolent place. In her struggle, Aenea is discreetly supported by a collective of advanced intelligent species who perceive ruthless, deprived of empathy artificial intelligences of the TechnoCore as a threat to universal harmony, and help humanity proceed to a higher level. Ultimately, empathy turns out to be not a mere emotion, intrinsic to human species, but rather a physical principle resulting from the very structure of the universe.

As it can be plainly seen, both Simmon's and Liu's works share a lot of characteristics: they refer to the same literary traditions, employ similar narrative strategies and conventions, and are equally inspired by the same branches of modern science (cosmology and quantum physics). They both impress with the scope and complexity of presented visions. Above all, they ask almost identical, fundamental questions about the nature of the universe and the possible future of humankind. The answers they give, are, however, strikingly different.

In 'Mariaż dwóch światów...' I emphasized the struggle of the two worldviews in contemporary science (including not only the natural sciences, but also the humanities — psychology, philosophy, theology, etc.) and more broadly in culture — the reductionist/materialistic and the holistic/para-religious ones. In short, the para-religious or holistic worldview, which does not need to be associated with any particular religion, implies the possibility of certain transcendental meaning, a deeper destiny which may refer both to human life and the very existence of the universe as such. It assumes that certain aspects of reality that cannot be convincingly described or even perceived by natural sciences (we might call them 'transcendental' or 'spiritual') are, in fact, real. On the other hand, the reductionist/ materialistic approach assumes that the whole reality (including, as many contemporary neurobiologists suggest, the phenomenon of human mind or 'soul') can be reduced to mechanisms describable and explainable completely by standard tools of natural sciences. Any deeper 'meaning' or 'spirituality' is not of an autonomous or transcendental nature but is, at best, emergent, that is, it emerges from basic purely physical processes, perhaps constituting merely a by-product of the evolution, (which obviously is only aimed at the survival of the fittest) or a certain cognitive illusion. Visions presented by Dan Simmons and Cixin Liu are largely informed by these two opposing worldviews.

The greatest strength of the *Hyperion Cantos* is, perhaps, the revision of the holistic worldview: the rewriting or the conversion of 'the transcendental vision' from the irrational and para-religious paradigm to the rational and para-scientific one, without losing its basic traits: the sense of deeper meaning related both to human life and the universe itself, the unity and sacredness of all life, the significance of love and empathy which gain solid, physical foundations. This is, in a way, an adequate gospel or metaphysics for the quantum age, on one hand discarding the old religious dogmas in the face of the modern scientific research, but on the other still preserving hope and consolation that traditional religious systems used to offer for thousands of years.⁸

Liu's text, in turn, adopts an extreme version of the reductionist/materialist worldview. Taking into account the fact that his novels have been written in contemporary communist China, one might assume ideological or political motivation behind it, but it would probably be a false trail. Amazingly pessimistic message of *ROEP* has apparently nothing to do with the Marxist philosophy which has always inspired mediocre at best but rather optimistic SF (vide classical Soviet space operas in the vein of, for example, Sergey Snegov novels). Paradoxically, the interstellar optimism of communist SF, related to its unquestioning faith in progress, power of man and Marxist-Leninist principles, shares a lot (save, obviously, for the last of the characteristics mentioned above which, however, might be easily replaced by, say, the spirit of American individualism and entrepreneurship) with many American or British works of the Golden era of SF. Both of these groups of texts seem to have been definitely informed by the rational, materialistic paradigm. But Liu's work exemplifies yet another version of materialism/reductionism. It seems to have been influenced by the metaphysical scepticism of such prominent figures of modern science as, for example, Stephen Hawking or Brian Greene⁹ or the apparently incomprehensible failure to detect activity of alien civilizations in space.¹⁰

 $^{^8}$ The *Hyperion Cantos* are to the largest extent inspired by Christianity but they also refer to several Buddhist ideas.

⁹ A good approximation of this reductionist attitude one can find, for example, in Brian Green's popular study: *Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*, Allen Lane, New York 2020.

It is usually referred to as "the Fermi Paradox". As Gerry Canavan explains and comments: "The idea of the Fermi Paradox, in brief, is that if our ideas about how common life is in the universe are correct the human race should already have encountered evidence of alien life, perhaps in cosmic phenomenon that can't be explained other than the massive galactic engineering projects of super-advanced technological civilizations but perhaps also in their physical presence on the Earth [...]. It is a mystery that we can't find anyone else, a mystery that implies the optimistic future of the consensus cosmogony is likely somehow wrong. The fact that we can't find any aliens in the heavens suggests we'll never get to the stars either" ('Death Immortalized', *The New Inquiry*, 27.10.2016, https://thenewinquiry.com/death-immortalized/, accessed: 10.11.2020). Liu, of course, cleverly explains the Fermi paradox with "the Dark Forest" rule.

Liu draws radical but logical conclusions from philosophical and scientific premises he adopts. It may be even argued that his version of materialism is much more coherent than those referred to in the previous paragraph, because it is devoid of all ideological, politically motivated or wishful elements. His universe is a metaphysically 'empty,' soulless place. *Death's End* 'fully dispenses with the God hypothesis,'¹¹ in both its traditional religious variations and its para-scientific, rationalized substitutes as Simmon's 'void that binds.' There is no place for community of peaceful civilizations as universal empathy is replaced by universal hostility. As Canavan concludes, 'it turns out there is nothing outside Darwin, outside gametheory, outside imperialism, outside race-hate. There are no pacifistic victories to be had in Liu's version of *Civilization*, no *Star Trek* future of peace and mutual cooperation.' ¹² Thus — in conformity with 'the Dark Forest' rule that determines 'cosmic sociology' — Liu's premises unavoidably lead to the destruction of not only Trisolaris and Earth but also every intelligent species that ever inhabited our universe, and, ultimately, the universe itself.

It is worth noting that — contrary, for example, to many SF works of dystopian tradition — ROEP does not blame the flaws in human nature for this ultimate failure. In fact, the overall depiction of humankind is rather balanced and sympathetic, despite the gloomy recount of the cultural revolution in China at the beginning of the first volume. What seems to be a great paradox, humanity dooms itself when it chooses for the Swordholder the noble Cheng Xin representing humanity's best traits rather than her psychotic rival.¹³ Despite her virtues, or, perhaps, because of them, Cheng Xin will not rise to become a humanity's saviour like Aenea, but rather puts it on the verge of extinction. She cannot be a saviour; human virtue, sacrifice, love or compassion are completely insignificant in this soulless universe. They are empty gestures that may be (and are by *ROEP*'s narration) appreciated for their own sake but carry no deeper meaning as they are not rooted in any higher metaphysical (or, in fact, as in the Hyperion Cantos, physical) reality. And, reversely, the dark sides of human nature which are, to some extent, a reflection of laws governing universe, in the end prove to be equally insignificant. There is no salvation and — ironically — condemnation. The only ultimate reality is that of death and the end of all things — 'a death that survives everything, an abstracted concept of death that itself never ends, that just dies and dies and dies.'14

As it has been noted previously, *ROEP*'s narration is often regarded as unrefined and almost completely subordinated to the presentation of cognitive ideas

¹¹ G. Canavan, op. cit.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ See L. Guanxi, 'China Turns Outward: On the Literary Significance of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies* 49, 2019, no. 1, p. 13.

¹⁴ G. Canavan, *op. cit.* Cavanah also suggests that the English title *Death's End* (and thus also the Polish — *Koniec śmierci*) is not quite adequate as the Chinese original suggests rather *Death Immortalized* or *The Immortal Death*.

in the text. In the latter part of my discussion I will attempt to argue that Liu's storytelling may, in fact, be more meaningful than it appears at first sight.

If we compare the narrations of *HC* and *ROEP*, it is clearly visible that both use certain operations to make their respective plots more attractive, to engage the reader, to introduce suspense, etc. The narrative structure of the *Cantos*, is perhaps, more interesting and sophisticated (especially in *Hyperion* inspired by *Canterbury Tales*), but both works employ typical space opera patterns and tropes, honouring SF tradition. In both cases the language is relatively simple and transparent, and it is clearly meant to primarily forward the plot and convey texts' cognitive messages and not to focus reader's attention too much on its own organization. Some occasional, minor experiments in *Cantos* (such as modelling the speech of Ummon, one of the Artificial Intelligences of Technocore on Buddhist koans) are not obtrusive. The characters in both novels are also constructed with proper care about their inner motivations and quite believable. In conformity with the conventions typical for contemporary SF they are instrumental (and subordinated to) conveying the cognitive ideas but at the same time also round and autonomous enough to preserve the feeling of verisimilitude and win readers' sympathy.

The real difference becomes visible when we look closely at the construction of the story itself. Simmons extensively uses the conventions of adventure SF which, in turn, are inspired by classical storytelling and mythopoeic structures. The events, then, do not 'occur of [their] own necessity, rather than according to the dictates of an overall plot.' The narrative abounds in dramatic confrontations with antagonists, unavoidable encounters, skilfully woven subplots, denouements, etc. All those operations subvert the notion of verisimilitude understood as acknowledging the randomness of life and the universe. They belong to popular or genre literature, but, at the same time, indirectly result from the already mentioned mythopoeic patterns. At a higher level they reflect human longing for fulfilment and search for the meaning — both of an individual human life, and of the universe itself. The *Hyperion Cantos* are, perhaps, a quintessential example of a successful marriage of two basic functions of literature as described by Robert Scholes — cognition and sublimation. If It, as it has been said, delivers a cathar-

¹⁵ Comp. Brian Attebery's discussion on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the criticism devoted to this work (B. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1992, pp. 18–19).

¹⁶ Both notions are especially useful in relation to non-mimetic literature. As Scholes argues: 'Fiction has always been characterized to perform two functions. Some fictions accomplish both equally, some emphasize one, but a work which accomplishes neither must be a bad fiction or no fiction at all. We may call these functions sublimation and cognition. As sublimation, fiction is a way of turning our concerns into satisfying shape, a way of relieving anxiety, of making life bearable. Sometime as this function of fiction is called a dirty and degrading word: "escapism." But it is not exactly that, any more than sleep is an escape from not being in a dream, from being wherever we are when we are asleep and not dreaming. Sleep and dreaming are aspects of life which are important because they are necessary for our functioning as waking beings. A healthy person sleeps and dreams in order to awake refreshed. As sublimation, fiction takes our worst fears and takes

sis; an Eucatastrophe. Thus, the narrative structure of the tetralogy parallels its optimistic (meta)physical message. The existence of some higher destiny towards which protagonist head is reflected by the construction of the plot itself and its final culmination and denouement.

In an analogical way, it can be argued that the narrative structure of Liu's work is not merely accidental or pretextual but echoes the gloomy vision of the universe presented therein. The narration discards operations described in the previous paragraph and constantly defies expectations of the reader.¹⁷ The protagonists or characters may be treated by the narrator with sympathy and understanding, but, ultimately, their fate is determined by the authorial pessimistic vision. They are simply some of the multitude of actors whose point of view has been presented because they are more or less instrumental in the recounted events or simply bear witness to them. But — in contradistinction to the protagonists of the *Hyperion Cantos* — Aenea, Raul Endymion, Father De Soya or others — after all, their actions, wrong or right, in the end turn out to be insignificant and unable to change the final outcome. The rejection of anthropocentrism as a philosophical idea results in the rejection of 'protagonist-centrism' as a narrative device.

Consequently, the convention used by Cixin Liu might be described as a 'hyper-mimetic' space opera. The narrator explores such plot as it seems to unavoidably result from his reflections on history, sociology, psychology and human nature in general as well as his assumptions concerning the evolution of intelligent life. Narration pays a due homage to the randomness of life and indifference of the universe. This is, in a way, not a story proper, not a mythopoeic saga, but rather a history, a fictionalized chronicle of imaginary, but at the same time imaginable, future. In soulless universe no plots that can lead to Eucatastrophe or fulfilment are possible. A true story can bring no consolation when the only truth is the death of the universe itself. It can merely document the vain human struggle to avert the end of all things.

them by organizing them in a form charged with meaning and value. Even the label "escapist" acknowledges that fiction is connected to our actual existence by offering us relief from its problems and pressure [...] In its cognitive function, fiction helps us to know ourselves and our existential situation. Because fiction does function in this way, it has sometimes been assumed that it must offer us a record of experience or a picture of real life. This is the realistic fallacy, which so much of contemporary critical thought has labored to expose. For fiction offers us not transcriptions of actuality but systematic models which are distinct from reality, though they may be related to it in various ways. [...] All fiction contributes to cognition [...] by providing us with models that reveal the nature of reality by their very failure to coincide with it' (R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation*, London 1975, pp. 4–6).

¹⁷ See my comment on *Dark Forest*'s ending in 'Trylogia *Wspomnienie o przeszłości zie-mi*'. Another example of defying readers' expectations might be the romantic motif of Yun Tianming's love for Cheng Xin. On several occasions it almost seems that the two lovers — separated by time, space and their respective fates — will finally, after all, reunite (perhaps in a similar 'Eucatastrophic,' apparently miraculous but rationally explainable fashion as Aenea and Raul Endymion reunite at the end of *The Rise of Endymion*). However, it never happens.

Thus, paradoxically, the apparently crude and simple narration of *The Remembrance Of Earth's Past* may alternatively be viewed as a conscious literary operation aimed at enhancing the trilogy's message, and Liu's work proves to be not only a major extrapolative achievement of recent science fiction, but also an interesting artistic one.

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