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Gunn's works are largely founded upon an opposition of (natural) «delight» to (intellectual) «light». In his later novels an insistence on the metaphor of light obscures his vision of delight. This paper traces the problem back to earlier novels, where Gunn seems more aware of the power of Light, or writing (*écriture*), over Delight, or «truth in the living». In *The Serpent* the problem is revealed as the difference between words and full meaning while in his historical novels it involves a distrust of historical writing. A deconstructivist approach to Gunn's writing suggests how the first term prevails in the correlative dualities light/darkness, history/legend, male/female, first/second self, culture/nature, Western Philosophy/ Eastern Zen, etc. The struggle to strike a balance is what gives Gunn's novels their dramatic quality.

Metaphors of light pervade Neil M. Gunn's novels. Hence Francis R. Hart has summed up the novelist's career aptly under the title «Neil Gunn's Drama of the Light» (Hart 1987, 87-102). Hart emphasizes «less what is achieved than what is attempted» by Gunn's novels, since the «struggle for the impersonal, for integration, for light» (102) can reach no conclusion. Yet Hart's chronological review of Gunn's output implies a progressive enlightenment. It is our purpose to read that progression in reverse and, in so doing, suggest that Gunn's creative struggle was with the instability of meaning and the ambivalence of the values words designate.

The philosopher-hero Tom in *The Serpent* (1943) faces a cognitive crux that may recall Derrida's notion of *differance*:

Obviously a truth was a truth whoever expressed it and the introduction of «difference» was absurd. Still, truth in the living (as distinct from the mathematical) realm had to be phrased and the way in which it was phrased affected as a simple matter of fact the mind of the recipient. (Gunn 1943, 249)

This is a «curious personal discovery» he has made about «the meaning of literature.» But he then dismisses it arguing to himself that, anyway, in good writing (such as Voltaire's biblical criticism, which prompted that discovery), there was «implicit . . . a profound apprehension of total life» (1943, 248-9). Much like Tom, Gunn's novels waver between suspicions about the reliability of words to express truth, and a desire for total meaning. Gunn's writing likewise reflects on a distrust of the writing (*écriture* in Derrida's sense) of history, which he believed a falsification of the *true* legend of the Gaelic people, while the (English) language and the form of the novel tend to submit his narrative to that same light of historical writing.

Light, the metaphor Gunn uses most insistently, has a long tradition in Western philosophy signifying natural intelligence or reason (see Derrida 1974). It was, however, towards an Eastern school, the Way of Zen, where light stands for intuitive insight, that the writer was decisively drawn in his last active years, the 1950s. Nevertheless, John Burns's

A Celebration of the Light (1988) gets carried away by the parallels between Gunn's ideas and those of certain Far Eastern philosophers. While Burns's thesis is «most enlightening and suggestive», as Hart says (Burns 1988, xi), it rests upon an uncritical comparison. Thus Burns's bibliography includes many books about Oriental thought, but not, for example, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Umberto Eco (1984, 224) has analysed the fashion of Zen from a Western perspective, suggesting it catches on wherever forms of non-ideological, mystic-erotic reaction to industrial civilization set in. Such a reaction is present in Gunn's novels, which regard city life as alienating man's «true nature». ¹ In short, Gunn found in Zen a system of thought to support an opposition of nature to reason.

However, Gunn's heroes in search of wisdom often fall in the snares of rational, logocentric order that the Way of Zen would have avoided. Western man, in Eco's view (1984, 243), will not remain long lost in the contemplation of multiplicity before trying to dominate and recompose it. This is what the Philosopher does in *The Serpent* when he concludes that «Perhaps amid the intellectual and spiritual efforts of man, literature . . . had the job of synthesising for and in the individual all the theses and anti-theses . . .»; then he posits one of Gunn's key ideas: «the living individual» as «the essence of the communal whole» (Gunn, 1943, 249) is the centre of coherence. Zen is certainly more at ease with plurality and difference than Gunn's heroes.

Gunn was impressed by Zen to the extent of adopting its ways of *satori* (liberation) to structure his autobiography (Burns, 1988, 5), *The Atom of Delight* (1956). It works well there. But we can hardly disagree with Margery McCulloch's (1987, 179-80, 82, 168) valuation of «Eastern» influence on Gunn's late works, particularly the novels *The Well at the World's End* (1951) and *The Other Landscape* (1954), where, in her view, he yields too often to «his natural inclination to look backwards towards an idealised past and the spiritual as opposed to the material world», and elusive style «as a result of him *not* saying precisely what he means». In an article called «The Flash» (in McCleery 1987, 232-7) Gunn tries to define what living by Zen means, and ends up quoting D.T. Suzuki: «The living by Zen makes us aware of a mysterious something which escapes intellectual grasp»; but if we admit that Highlanders, being accustomed to «'other' states of mind' such as second sight, are suited to the Way of Zen, as Gunn asserts, then neither Zen nor the Highland mind are suitable for a rational medium like the novel (poetry might be better). While Gunn's novels stress sensory experience, they tend towards a discursiveness in the exposition of ideas, thus becoming «intellectual». Zen might be a way of seeing, but not of writing. «For truth is not of words, but of vision», as Gunn wrote in *Morning Tide* (1931, 272). So in the later novels that are «literally filled with light» (Burns 1988, 170), light obscures the necessarily verbal rendering of vision. ²

At least since the late 1930s Gunn had to defend himself from charges of elusiveness (Hart & Pick 1981, 142-3). *The Atom of Delight* is largely Gunn's apology for his style. What he calls «delight», the experience of man's «second self», the enjoyment of a sudden awareness of the creative force, or «wholeness», in everyday life, is beyond words, re-

¹ Gunn's novels *Wild Geese Overheard* (1939), *Second Sight* (1940), *The Key of the Chest* (1945), *The Drinking Well* (1946), *The Shadow* (1948), *The Silver Bough* (1948) and *The Lost Chart* (1949) are in one way or another concerned with the regenerative possibilities of life in ideal Highland communities as opposed to the destructive forces of modern urban society.

² There are notable exceptions, for example *Bloodhunt* (1952), which McCulloch (1987, 170-7) regards as Gunn's last great novel.

ason, and man's «first self». Gunn justified his writing of what cannot be analysed in words:

Admittedly, the talk that *illuminates* may also be a kind of analysis in that it singles out elements or attitudes in the delight, but . . . if perfectly done [it] would evoke the delight. In this sense the talk is creative, not destructive. Thus to be evocative is art's high aim (1986, 229. Emphasis added.)

The second self cannot be written down, it is to be evoked. It appears contradictory to reason, since «at any given moment of experiencing wholeness, there is 'an end', which is yet an intimation of 'no end'». This is exemplified by the end of *The Silver Darlings* (1941, 584), where stillness and movement overlap as Finn rests within the quietude of a prehistoric broch: «Time became a stilled heart-beat. Stealthy, climbing sounds . . . The hunters in their primordial humour were closing in. Life had come for him». The novel ends as its hero begins life in all its «wholeness», as a masculine member of his Highland community.

At its best Gunn's writing is subtly evocative of lived experience. His elusiveness is, in fact, a controlled strategy to capture those moments of delight «by the way» (1956, 1-5). He is even able to raise them to the sphere of character in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (1944), whose hero Young Art (his name is significant: 1944, 131-2) rebels against the oppressive rules of a modern dystopia (with echoes of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes) by repeatedly escaping in magic ways from those in control of society. As it turns out, Art's escapes actually stir up a non-violent revolution, for his legendary fame arouses the urban crowds of the Green Isle and forces its rulers to undo their own intellectual logic. Art is powerful because he is able to digest the forbidden fruit that the authorities of the Green Isle regard as poison. The boy's spontaneous, «natural» integrity is opposed to the «conception of the corporate mind» that the enlightened rulers try to impose on everyone. He embodies «the race» in a double sense: «You'll say to a fellow: 'It's a fine day for the race.' And he'll say: 'What race?' And you say: 'The human race.' That fairly takes him in» (1944, 175). It is Art's elusiveness that makes him so forceful an embodiment of delight.

The basic fissures in the wholeness of Gunn's imagery have more to do with *the light* than with «delight». Even if Gunn (1986, 229) argues for the openness of delight, and implicitly of his own novels, these tend towards closure in a final moment of illumination. Sometimes the narrator is the mature man who has become experienced in life and learned in study, and who is recollecting the magic of his boyhood, as in *The Atom of Delight* and in *Highland River* (1937), or the conflicts of his youth, as in *The Serpent* (1943). In the latter Tom compares Hume and Rousseau's contrasting attitudes to life with those of men and women, respectively: «He began to perceive the definitions of justice, beauty, chastity, truth, not as absolutes but as masculine conceptions» (1943, 238). He is just trying to figure out why his girlfriend Janet left him for another man. Ironically, all he is able to understand is why he *cannot* understand it: «the feminine face — it was always Janet's face — flitting by in a darkness, like the darkness of a wood . . . could not enter the male clearing where Hume sat or where Tom himself watched» (idem). Often in Gunn's novels a male hero gets to the enlightened centre while women remain flitting in the dark.

It is a paradox that Gunn's men should have to struggle so heroically for the essential delight that, as it seems, his women grasp so easily: «She saw what she wanted, the inner kernel, the thing-in-itself, and went, by some law of her feminine being, unerringly for that» (1943, 240). Not until the end of the novel, just before dying, does the Philosopher distinguish those «subtleties that no pen could record»: «a feeling of delight, which cannot be named» (1943, 254). The «essential kinship to Rousseau» he found in the feminine mind (1943, 238), as opposed to Hume's intellectual, analytic, male mind, responds to

Gunn's identification of women with essential Nature. It corresponds to the logic of the supplement that Derrida examines in his reading of Rousseau (Norris 1982, 32-41; Derrida 1967, 237-8): the word is only a supplement added to intuitive knowledge, like writing to live speech, culture to nature, violence to innocence, history to the origin, etc. As a result Gunn's men appear to be the supplement of women: «more than their usefulness, men were to them [women] their final ornament» (Gunn 1934, 65). However, the logic is plainly undone by the actual male prevalence in novels that centre on a male hero articulating the narrative in his own ideas and concepts, while often trying to possess an elusive, absent heroine. Essentially he is the light, and she is delight.

Such oppositions also undermine the Philosopher's attempt to «bring to a focus in himself, if not the meaning of the whole, at least some coherent apprehension of the whole», to find in himself «a simple individual, a unit of the crofting folk» apart from «the opposing systems» of «philosophers and political theorists» (1943, 249). In Gunn's novels that mythical unity and wholeness rests upon a supposedly «original» and «natural» Highland culture, which made a rigid distinction of male and female roles, in which men are active hunters, and women passive gatherers. Women may have the glory, but men have the power. Sexes are meant to be complementary like the opposite forces of *yin* and *yang* in Zen, but Gunn's world favours the male principle.

The quest for enlightenment that shapes *The Silver Darlings* (1941) is markedly masculine (see Whyte 1995). It tells how Finn reaches manhood by stages, firstly through the feat of climbing the cliffs of Rona to get supplies for his exhaust fellow fishermen, which earns him a comparison with the legendary Gaelic hero Finn Mac Coul, the son of a Celtic sky-god, by the old men of Helmsdale (Gunn 1941, 449); then he enters «with clear consciousness upon the estate of manhood» when he imagines himself with his own croft and his own boat (502) and, finally, he is able to make love to the dark-haired girl Una in the «darkness of the trees» (566). Once he has proved his manhood he reaches a final illumination within the prehistoric broch called «the House of Peace», where he has a vision of himself as a white-haired old man, the head of his own tribe (583).

While stylistically and as a folk epic *The Silver Darlings* is a huge achievement, it nevertheless lends itself perhaps all too easily to an interpretation like that of McCleery (1985, 192), who concludes that the central question is which of these alternatives Finn will follow: «Catrine [his widowed mother] is the *anima*, like the land, stable, fertile, and Roddie [Finn's surrogate father, a fisherman of Viking stock] is the *animus*, like the sea, changeable, powerful». For him the answer is the «establishment of the *animus* as the dominant element», because, in McCleery's view, that «is the proper process of life enacted in every generation. It leads to a well-integrated individual but also to a healthy, dynamic culture in which the *anima* and the *animus* have found a balance». McCleery's reading proves how Gunn's novels tend towards a duality where the male principle prevails over the female, like light over darkness.

In dreams Finn sees himself climbing walls (1941, 158-9, 303), an image suggesting his inner efforts towards what Erich Fromm (1942, 222) called «the realization of man's total personality», which in the novel can be said to coincide with Finn's climb of the precipice of Rona. But in the end one cannot help wondering why after so much effort the hero finds himself enclosed within another wall, that of the old Pictish broch.

Highland River (1937) is a quest for the light of racial origins. As a compelling recreation of the author's childhood in the Highlands landscape, it is suitably narrated in flashbacks and built upon his favourite theme of salmon-poaching, combining local colour and lived experience with the Celtic myth of the Salmon of Knowledge. The plot, however,

responds to what Owens (1983, 65), translating Lyotard's concept of *grand récit*, calls «narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature». In this novel Kenn, the hero who is (in Wordsworthian terms) recollecting his emotions in tranquillity, is a nuclear physicist, which is meant to endow him with some authority. Yet Gunn's use of a scientific metanarrative is quite redundant, for the delight of reading *Highland River* arises from its lyrical evocation of that «speechless thing beyond the realm of luck» (Gunn 1960, 32), rather than its enlightened discourse on human instinct, the collective unconscious, or «the reasons prompting his mind to acceptance of the modern anthropologist's belief in the existence once upon a time of the Golden Age!» (219).³

Gunn's previous novel, *Butcher's Broom* (1934), narrates the tragedy of historical disintegration that had prompted him to seek methods of reintegration in his later novels, particularly in *The Silver Darlings*, where the descendants of evicted Gaels survive by turning their lives to fishing. Though written when the author was still actively engaged in Scottish nationalism, *Butcher's Broom* avoids being too partisan. The main character is an old woman, Dark Mairi, a symbol of the land's magic rather than a realistic human conscience,⁴ as she is almost purely irrational in «her steady unthinking darkness» (1934, 10). She and the rest of the folk in the valley of Riasgan are contrasted with the «light» of «Jevovah's eye upon the valley», «the crystal doctrine» of the Presbyterian minister (18). Another key contrast is that between Thomas the Drover, who stands for the Ossianic, Jacobite ideology already deprived of any political potential, and Bannerman, the religious fanatic who collaborates with the evictors by preaching passivity to his own people. The other typical characters are Angus the old bard and chieftain who stands for the lost Gaelic values; Davie the boy who grows up in the tragic experience; Elie the unfortunate young girl who loses her lover Colin; old Roy the piper who goes mad; Seonaid the sturdy Gaelic woman who puts up the last resistance, and the villain Heller (the historical Patrick Sellar). Together they form the legendary tapestry of the Sutherland Clearances. Their legend for the author was more important than their history, as indeed it is for Scottish culture in general (Richard 1985, 373). The novel is not too sentimental, partly because Mairi does not feel quite human. She is the answer to a question like that of Norman MacCaig in «A Man in Assynt» (MacCaig 1971, 101): «Who owns this landscape - / . . . / False question, for / this landscape is / masterless / and intractable in any terms / that are human». When the factor's dogs kill Dark Mairi, it means both less and more than the death of an old woman. She is Gunn's boldest attempt to place the dark at the centre of his writing.

In *Sun Circle* (1933), on the other hand, Gunn places Light at the centre of the plot, through the presence of a nameless «Master» whom his pupil Aniel sees sitting «with eternity about him in a circle of light» (Gunn 1933, 114). Aniel is a typical hero-artist in quest of illumination. Yet all the knowledge he needs seems to be already found in the Master; all Aniel has to do is relate the Master's spiritual guidance to his own experience in the ninth-century Highlands milieu. The Master is supposed to teach Aniel the artist's detachment and impartiality: «Time will divide the image from the making, and then you

³ By «the modern anthropologist» Gunn probably meant H.J. Massingham (1927), whose book gained some popularity, though his belief in golden ages is not supported by any scientific method.

⁴ The novel was originally to have been titled «Dark Mairi» or «The Dark Woman». See Hart & Pick (1981, 105). Dark Mairi is often compared with Mrs Scott in Ian Chrichton Smith's *Consider the Lilies* (1974): «Dark Mairi is the tragic center, but by her nature she cannot serve as a central consciousness like Smith's Mrs. Scott or Mac Colla's Zachary» (Hart 1978, 332).

will cleave through and stand on the edge between the Two Forces of the world» (117). However, this sort of dualistic teaching pre-conditions the response of the pupil: one of the forces will tend to look better to him, and it will be the one the Master favours.

Aniel is also a doubting hero of historical romance in the *Waverley* tradition. Through his outlook, all too conveniently clarified by an omniscient narrator and by the Master, we are led into a world of dualities: light/dark, male/female, Gilbrude's Druidism/Molrua's Christianity, Vikings/Highlanders, fair Nessa/ dark Breeta, the Tower/the Grove, etc. No image in the novel conveys its universe better than that of mountains whose tops are like nipples offered to the sky. The simile is repeated up to four times (1933, 22, 56, 73, 145). It points to a natural cosmic harmony in which mother earth suckles the sky god illuminating her. In the novel the earth involves the darkness of the forest, the irrational, the primeval race, the timeless, the feminine, the inexpressible; in contrast the sun in the sky is the light, the rational, the temporal, power, and even the very words of the novel. As an artist Aniel feels the attraction of sun images (207), while as a man he is drawn towards Breeta, a Pictish girl of dark complexion. The final victory of light is inevitable from the «Outline» prefacing the novel, which sums up its action from a high, sun-like viewpoint. But the interest of the story lies in the intervening struggle of the artist in a changing world.

At several points Aniel is tempted by sheer power, and he even abducts Nessa, the blonde daughter of his chieftain. But she prefers Haakon, the new Viking ruler. Aniel accepts the fact that she is too strong for him and even comes to admire the fair couple she makes with Haakon: «here at last was the light that would illuminate the pit of their souls — his soul» (353). Then, inspired by the Master, Aniel wonders whether his people really need their leadership, since their strength is in their culture:

They are a dark intricate people, loving music and fun . . . Out of their pretences they make stories . . . They also make tunes . . . These tunes and these games are never forgotten, so that in times of the greater danger, . . . in the blood times when the wolfish mind is a black demon, even then the old time will come in, will possess and conquer. How then can they ever be lead? They cannot (353-4).

Nevertheless he goes on to admit the need for a leader, even if «there is no abiding importance in him» because he just «draws his virtue out of them» and out of their best music. The leader is «for ever consumed by them — to be needed once more, or the people themselves will be broken by a greater ruler» (355). In his essay *Whisky and Scotland* Gunn (1935: 99-100) explained nationalism referring to contemporary Germany as a pendulum that swings «backward as well as forward! Rise and fall; power and decadence. But Einstein emerges», and then «When Hitler goes Einstein will return. That we can be sure of. The rest is smoke that obscures the everlasting fire.»⁵ Thus from Gunn's «long pers-

⁵ This is an allusion to Goethe's «Name is Schall und Rauch, / Umnebelnd Himmelsglut», expressing Gunn's characteristic distrust of words to convey essential truth. Gunn was sometimes accused of Nazi sympathies, but the obvious case was as McCleery (1987: 12-3) sums it up: Gunn's sympathies were with the German people and their cultural revival, not with the Nazi regime, even though the latter was deftly exploiting German nationalism and idealism. His German sympathies may have prompted his invitations to Germany in the late 1930s, but, as Hart and Pick (1981: 163) suggest, he must have disappointed his hosts if indeed what they expected of him was any political collaboration beyond friendly articles like «As Drunk as a Bavarian» of 1939, whose casual tone studiously ignores the political situation: «Why should a man's peace on a short holiday be disturbed? There will be war-talk and ideologies enow [*sic*] presently» (McCleery 1987: 191).

pective of history» there emerges a duality of destruction and renaissance, where only the people's spirit persists. He perceived that *Geist* by the Rhine in 1938, when he heard boys singing German folksongs (Hart & Pick 1981: 34, 162).

A Spenglerian vision of history as cycles of power and decadence, if accepted, could always be used to justify violence. As in all dualities, in power/decadence the first member sets the rules, and once again when Einstein goes Hitler will return. But there remains a third element in *Sun Circle*: the pure delight in traditional music. Gunn always attached great importance to music (Gunn 1986: 6, 167, 229). He felt it was essentially free from words, that is, from discourse or *écriture*, so it is everlasting. Again, this could lead into the duality music/discourse which results in music *as* discourse, for the contemporary German case showed how folk music could be used by a totalitarian ideology.

In a key passage of *Sun Circle* Aniel starts playing Leu's flute. Leu is now dead, his Koorich tribe destroyed by two successive fires in the woods. But their free spirit, which Gunn presents as a glimpse of the Golden Age, lives on in Leu's flute (Leu is the name of a Celtic sun god). It can play the true music of a nation. As Gunn makes clear, its music is «Poison». This is analogous with the contradictory meanings of *pharmakon* in Derrida's critique of Plato's *Phaedrus* (Peretti 1989: 42-3): the *pharmakon*, like writing, both heals and kills the living. Thus Aniel finds he can play three notes on the flute: «Always these three notes, laying hold of Poison and finishing him off» (363). Through sheer repetition⁶ they begin to take up a meaning: «It might look as if tragedy in its final aspect was an orgy of creation, a flame, a terrible flame, a fire. There was fire in Poison's head» (362). The musical pattern is confirmed with the third occurrence of a fire, this time signalling the historical triumph of the Norsemen: «here was Fire itself at last, the fire of the gods, sacrificing and cleansing the world» (382). With the third repetition of fire the meaning of the novel reaches the legendary, beyond the duality of power and decadence.

The «old Poison» of the Koorich flute does away with binary hierarchies, making ambivalent both members of each opposition: «Day and night, went the three notes at the end, night and day» (363). Like Derrida, Gunn's hero seems to find that three, far from being the closure of any dialectic, is really the number of the infinite (Derrida 1989: 408). *Sun Circle*, *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings*, form a trilogy that Hart (1971, 52) called «three ambitious 'historical' novels, all about the inadequacy of history as a way of seeing». There is already a significant three-part division in *Morning Tide* (1931), the novel inaugurating Gunn's mythical vision with its celebrated first words: «The boy's eyes opened in wonder . . .». But precisely from that moment on Gunn's writing is ruled by what Derrida (1989, 115) called «the ultimate ingenuousness, that of the gaze», so that the unifying power of light would always prevail over plurality.

It is characteristic of Gunn's myth-making that the hero of *Sun Circle* should move into an illuminated centre of power at the close of the novel: «At the centre of his circle his spirit sat, and at the centre of his spirit was serenity for ever watchful» (366). In so doing he seems to forget the trinity he had been creating. We may ask with Derrida (1989, 405) whether that centre is not really the absence of play and difference: another name for death. Gunn's artist reduces an infinitely open triad to the more familiar binomial light/dark, with predictable result. In the very last words of the novel Aniel's eyes capture dark Breta into his circle of light: «He looked at her. She met his look and saw in it such an intense happiness that nothing lived outside the circle it put around them, and she was

⁶ «La pura repetición, aunque no cambie ni una cosa ni un signo, contiene una potencia ilimitada de perversión y de subversión» (Derrida 1989: 404).

caught by it as by an enchanted snare» (391). Like at the end of *The Silver Darlings*, the impression one might get is that the circle wherein the hero fortifies himself is deadly and violent, an intimidating symbol of power like the old brochs. The ending of *The Serpent* seems more coherent in that the hero gets killed by an adder, for here the Serpent symbolizes wisdom, sin, and «the woman, whose type is the serpent», who gives death and life, «Just as the sun destroys — and is the source of life» (Gunn 1943, 178). Thus Gunn grasped the poisonous ambivalence of light. From his first novel *The Grey Coast* (1926), as McCleery (1990, 174) points out, Gunn «shared membership of a romantic tradition characterised by such moments of illumination» and which also includes D.H. Lawrence. What distinguishes Gunn's writing is a distrust of such Light.

On the whole the pleasure of reading Gunn's novels derives from the delight of his writing in the Highlands landscape and folk, and from its brave struggle within the master narrative of Light. The latter is particularly focused in the most self-referential of his novels, *The Serpent*, where the Philosopher learns that true understanding is like the fairy gold, which turns in your hands into withered leaves or horse dung when you bring it into the light of the common day (1943, 178-9). It is unfair for Gunn to be accused of escapism. Aware as he is that the finest words are, at best, double-edged, he seldom claims truths are anything but individual, or that total meaning can be fixed. Still his heroes, notably Aniel in *Sun Circle*, assert the power of Highland culture to rekindle from its own dark ashes.

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