

The Retreat to Walden and the Calvinist-Protestant Imagination

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Abstract

Despite the relative erosion of Puritanism in the New England in which Thoreau grew up, and despite his trenchant critique of the Protestant ethic, the Calvinist-Protestant outlook left a deep impact on him in the way he perceived and structured reality. In going to the woods to be a true communicant with nature, in his solitude, and at times loneliness, and in his uncertainty regarding the outcome of his experiment in Walden, Thoreau evinces the influence of the Protestant view of salvation as a process to be entered into and as a goal to be eventually achieved outside the confines of communal and institutionalized religion, with all the attendant loneliness and insecurity. For the Protestant believer to mitigate his anxiety, he has to achieve a complete mastery over his life and to get intensely involved in worldly activity to glorify the Lord. Thoreau too went to the woods to exercise complete control over his life so as to harness it in the service of his ideal. Thoreau's revolutionary posture, his refusal to succumb to "the world" parallels the whole Protestant attempt at "reforming" the church and the world. In short, he evinces many of the traits of "the Protestant saint," who lives in the world but is never of it, and who gets involved in the world, only to conquer and reshape it.

There are several critical approaches to such a rich, complex, yet organically integrated work as **Walden**, and the reader is tempted to apply them simultaneously. The full meaning of the work is embedded in numerous images and details; in the total structure of the work, which is counterpointed by the specific structure of each chapter; in mythic references with overlapping Christian and pagan overtones; and in layers of meaning that can lend themselves to interpretations that are at once religious and economic. **Walden** is a work to be experienced, not in sequential narrative terms, but rather in radial terms that rely on aphorism, parable, paradox and longish descriptive passages whose surfaces merely suggest, rather than state, meaning. For this reason, singling out a theme as central or preferring one angle of approach to another is bound to appear arbitrary. However, it is a legitimate analytical strategy to isolate one aspect of a work and study it in this temporary stasis and clarity, hoping that by illuminating a part, the whole might be better understood and appreciated. In this paper, I will try to achieve some such objective by examining the religious context of **Walden**, to the inevitable exclusion of others.

It is true that the New England in which Thoreau grew up observed a highly attenuated version of Puritanism--namely, Unitarianism--and it is also true that secularism--already making serious inroads in the world of nineteenth-century America--was rapidly eroding the role of religion; nevertheless, the Protestant outlook on life in general, and the Puritan cluster of ideas or themes in particular, have never ceased to exercise a deep, albeit subtle and unnoticed, influence in America. There is an element of truth in Brownson's rather exaggerated claim that "Unitarianism had demolished Calvinism" and that it had brought "dogmatic Protestantism" to a speedy end, (Miller, 1967:9) but the religious impulse peculiar to those sects remained very much alive, expressing itself in various forms. New England Transcendentalism, an apparently nonreligious, secular movement, had an "inherently religious character," as Miller has rightly observed (Miller, 1967:14). It was inescapable that this religious impulse, while drawing upon the religious traditions of all cultures--Indian, Chinese, and others--had to take on, consciously or unconsciously, a certain Christian coloring. In his essay "Christian **Malgre' lui**," Michael Maloney asserts that the Christian tradition was "woven closely into Thoreau's conception of life" and, one might add, into that of the other Transcendentalists as well (Maloney, 1968:205).

It could be argued that while Thoreau's imagination--like almost all Occidental writers--was shaped by Christianity, it would be an overstatement to claim that his outlook on man and nature was basically Calvinist--Protestant, because, in a very important sense, his writings

contain some of the most trenchant and perceptive critiques of what came to be called the Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on work, acquisitiveness and frugality. But, paradoxical as it might sound, Puritanism did exercise a deep impact on the imagination of this self-professed critic of the Protestant ethic. Actually, this should come to us as no surprise, because, even though the Transcendentalists were the children of rationalism and Unitarianism, "all about them the society still bore the imprint of Calvinism; the theological break had come, but not the cultural." (Miller, 1956:200) In "The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau," Norman Foerster makes the point that Thoreau's New England, "despite a century of prose and reason, was still at bottom Puritan." (Foerster, 1916 - 17:192-212). Thoreau himself, Foerster argues, was quite well read in the local history of New England, which is also the history of puritan settlement in New England (Foerster, 1916-1917: 192-212). It is no wonder that Krutch speaks of Thoreau's "secular puritanism, (Krutch, 1974: 197) a paradoxical phrase coined to describe the subtle process of the simultaneous disappearance of religion on any manifest level and its strong persistence on the latent ones. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning, most critics recognized the Protestant aspect of Thoreau's imagination. For Emerson he was a "born Protestant," (Emerson, 1966: 266) and for Dewey he was some kind of a "Last Puritan." (Dewey, 1968:8)

Cavell, in **The Senses of Walden**, compared the whole Walden experiment to Puritan colonization in so far as it was "an attempt to live an idea" (Dewey, 1968: 11) and to embody, concretely, an ideal by building "a city on a hill." (Dewey, 1968: 11). Van Doren, in a keen perceptive observation, states that Thoreau heard "the ancestral Puritan voice" even as he hearkened to Confucius' recommendation about the "blamelessness of life" or "simply truth and earnestness." (Doren, 1961: 56) Indeed, it is quite safe to state that Thoreau, a secular humanist, was nevertheless profoundly influenced by the Calvinist - Protestant outlook in the way he perceived and structured reality. The influence was subtle and imperceptible, operating on the latent level of perception and sensibility rather than on the explicit level of doctrine. And it is to the exploration of that influence that the rest of this paper will be devoted.

We have learned not to speak of an "essential Protestantism" or of the "basic traits of Puritanism," or of the fundamentals or essence of anything for that matter. But, nevertheless, it is still quite useful, even necessary, to try to isolate clusters of themes and a number of premises whose unique combination sets Protestantism apart from the rest of Christianity. Probably the cardinal theme of Protestant doctrine is the belief in justification by grace through faith, which implies, on the one hand, man's complete helplessness in front of God and the worthlessness of his efforts to achieve salvation; but

on the other--which is more relevant to the present context--it implies both man's independence from any institutional frames that claimed the right to channel grace from God to man and also his freedom to experience grace directly and individually (Protestantism, 1974: Vol. 15, 99-108).

Most of the other Protestant themes and premises follow from his initial break with the communal and institutionalized view of religion. Salvation then becomes an individual rather than a communal concern. Thoreau's sensibility and outlook show a deep affinity with this view of salvation. Like Cotton Mather, he was deeply concerned with the salvation of his soul, (Metzger, 1961: 91) and, therefore, he went to the woods, and like Cotton Mather again, he sought salvation outside any institutional frames. In Walden, all alone, he tried "to be a true communicant in nature" (Metzger, 1961: 91) and to experience truth directly without any mediation (Metzger, 1961: 4).

Such directness of communication generates a sense of being alone with God. Throughout **Walden** this is insisted upon, and we learn from that book that "God is alone, but the devil, he is far from being alone"; he is too much involved with communities and institutions for "he sees a great deal of company; he is legion," (Thoreau, 1970: 268) a premise that structures Thoreau's narrative persona.

Throughout **Walden**, with the exception of only a few passages, Thoreau stands in splendid self-isolation quite reminiscent of that of the Puritan fathers on the shores of New England. Given this unique relationship with the Creator, the believer is plagued by the lack of **certitudo salvatio**, and by a deep inner isolation. This sense of alienation contrasts sharply with the feelings of the Catholic worshiper who, given his membership in a sacred community, and given his belief in the possibility of achieving salvation partly through his "own merits and efforts", is far less insecure (Protestantism, The New Encyclopedia Britannica). The lonely Calvinist, on the other hand, was always "prepared for the best, but expected the worst." (Horton and Edwards, 1967: 22). This same paradoxical quality characterized Thoreau's attitude when he went out seeking salvation in Walden. of the need to go out to confront his life, he was quite sure; of the outcome he was not at all confident--for the possibility stood, as he honestly averred, that one's life might prove to be "mean" (222).

Alone, uncertain of the outcome of one's life, helpless in the face of the uncertainty, the individual had to resort to some strategy to mitigate his anxiety. So even though salvation was impossible to attain through good

works, nevertheless, such works came to be considered "as a sign of election" (Weber, 1958 :115) In other words, good works, if they did not change one's destiny, at least helped one to know it. Intense involvement in worldly activity to glorify the Lord was recommended as a relatively effective means to "disperse religious doubts and give the certainty of grace." (Weber, 1958: 112).

Good works, however, consist not in a gradual piecemeal accumulation of individual good deeds; instead, they were the result of "a systematic self - control." (Weber, 1958:115). As Weber puts it, "the God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system" (Weber, 1958: 117). In the Catholic system, there was a religious division of labor, with laymen going about their business in the world and a monastic order forming a unified system, largely devoted to God. With the Reformation that division of labor was challenged, and the monastic impulse was released in the world, for "every Christian had to be a monk all his life". (Weber, 1958: 121) Man was seen as a saint, single-heartedly devoted to the idea of salvation and the glorification of the Lord, yet working for that salvation and glorification while in this world. That the Protestant saint was in this world but not of it was the basis of the Calvinist-Protestant idea of the calling and its sacredness; a man working at a desk, or by a machine, or even in a business was seen as "fulfilling God's purpose as profoundly as did any monk or nun in a convent." (Protestantism, The New Encyclopedia Britannica)

Thoreau's life in Walden is in a very profound sense a fulfillment of that ideal of complete mastery over, and control of, all aspects of one's life. His going to the woods -- a simple, natural setting -- made it possible for him to control all aspects of his experiment, to seal it off, as it were, from all complex socio-historical factors that cannot be controlled or charted. The self-discipline he imposed on himself, his asceticism, and his frugality are quite reminiscent of the conduct of the early Protestant fathers. Once controlled, Thoreau's life in Walden was harnessed in the service of God or whatever higher ideal he was pursuing.

Such systematic control of the Puritan's life made it much easier for him to "supervise his own state of grace" (Weber, 1958: 124) and to have at least an inkling about his salvation or damnation. Van Wyck Brooks, in **The Flowering of New England**, suggests that Thoreau kept extensive journals just "as his father and his father's father, the old French merchant... had kept

their business - ledgers." (Brooks: 300) A more likely antecedent is the general ethical ledgerism of the lonely Puritan, who tried to keep account of his life--a tradition that predates Thoreau's father and grandfather and goes back to the sixteenth century. **Walden**, the whole book, is Thoreau's account book, down to the last pence and the shortest period of a fully mastered life and of the conquest he achieved. The tables and the charts, the justifications and explanations, are all duly given, so that the reader can judge for himself whether this controlled life or experiment has paid off or not.

Labor in the context of a life totally directed to the service of God, ceases to be "the curse of Adam, a punishment for original sin"; it becomes a "positive command of God." (Parsons, 1968: 527) If the life of the believer is a stewardship in the service of God, which engages him in an unremitting service of the Almighty, then self-denying labor is a fulfillment of one's "own deep religious interests" (Parsons, 1968: 527) and "the highest ethical aims of man." (Parsons, 1968: 515) Doing one's duty is a sacred act and any diversions are considered a sin. Some of Thoreau's statements in **Walden** are among the most direct expressions of this work ethic, where labor is considered not as a means to an end, but "as an absolute end in itself" (Weber, 1958: 62) and even a religious duty that has a divine sanction: "If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable" (348). The next statement is even more blunt, for it sees this labor as part of a systematic attempt on the part of the individual to overcome his nature -- "nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome." And the preacher goes on, in the most didactic tone: "What avails it that you are Christians, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious?" (348).

Probably Thoreau expected us to view his two-year residence in **Walden** as part of that unremitting labor that cleans man and fulfills the religious aspects of his character. The innumerable references to, and images of, purgation and renewal in **Walden** would support such an interpretation.

Concomitant with the Protestant drive toward achieving salvation outside the confines of church and institutional channels is another series of themes and points of emphasis. The priesthood of all believers is one such theme. If all men share a calling, and if all these vocations are sacred, the priestly vocations are not in any sense superior to that of the businessman's or the office worker's. Divine grace flows--but not because of our good works, nor through the mediation of a certain ritual or priestly act. Thoreau in **Walden**

was both the prophet and the priest, and in some moments of intensity, the church and God. Between him and God there was no mediation. Probably Thoreau's emphasis both on simplicity and on the need to strip away the inessential and the unnecessary come out of a basic Protestant distrust of sensuous rituals and of a mediating priesthood.

This Protestant process of simplification is quite evident in "Economy," where Thoreau points to the fact that in democratic New England, "the accidental possession of wealth.. obtain (s) for the possessor almost universal respect," but such people who pay their respects to superfluities are "heathen (s)" who "need to have a missionary sent to them." Then the Puritan in him adds that his jacket and trousers, his hat and shoes-old as they are- "are fit to worship God in." All fanciful clothing is nothing but false skin that "partake (s) not of our life, and may be stripped off here and there without fatal injury" (163).

Another recurrent Protestant theme is the "authority of the word" (Protestantism, 1974) which, as was the case with the preceding themes -- justification by grace through faith and the priesthood of all believers -- helped to undermine the whole structure of authority and communalism that characterized Catholic Christianity. In the Bible, which is the Word of God, the believer found all that was necessary for salvation, thereby bypassing church, priest and rituals, to overcome and go beyond hundreds of years of Catholic Christianity. The ability of the believer to go back to the Bible, whenever he wanted to, was an assertion of "the right of private judgement" (Protestantism, The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974).

But above all, if the ultimate source of authority is neither the established church, nor the communal interpretation of the Bible, nor any inherited traditions, but rather the Word of God as interpreted by an individual rooted in his here and now, then, in a sense, the Protestant Reformation is an endless, open-ended process that readjusts itself as history fluctuates and as individuals change. As the writer of the entry on Protestantism in the **Encyclopedia Britannica (1974)** points out: "The Protestant movement... was conceived as an unfinished product, constantly to be judged by a reading of the Bible, its policy continually subject to debate, its policy open to an ongoing appraisal and change."

Whereas Thoreau did not share in the Protestant's unqualified reliance on the Word of God, his perception was influenced by many of the premises that

resulted from that faith; for instance, the right of private judgment is what prompted Thoreau to go out in the woods to find out for himself the meaning of life. Nor did he want to impose his findings on anyone, for he insisted that his conclusions were valid only for him; each individual had to find out for himself. And like a true Protestant believer, Thoreau, relying on his own experience in **Walden** in the here and now, denied any validity to history or to the experience of past generations. The whole experiment in Walden was, indeed, not to be duplicated either by the author himself or by anyone else, for, like a good Protestant, he left Walden for as good a reason as he went. Life, then, should be viewed as a continuous process, and any truths reached should be seen as inconclusive and, therefore, not final.

Even though Calvinist-Protestantism starts off with a strong emphasis on the depravity of man, his fallen nature, and his helplessness in the matter of salvation, it nevertheless generates a rugged individualism in its followers. An explanation of the paradox might lie in one of the strategies for mitigating one's uncertainty regarding salvation. The Calvinist believer was counseled "to make it his absolute duty to consider (himself) chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace, "which is, the philosophical base of what Weber calls the "self-confident saints." (Weber, 1958: 111)

This deep sense of being one of the elect, coupled with a strenuous effort to regulate one's life according to the ideals and dictates of the Bible, generated an attitude of utmost intensity and zeal. That attitude is unmistakable in **Walden**, and the protagonist might not speak of himself exactly as a chosen one, yet the seriousness of his tone bespeaks a degree of certainty that borders on a sense of election. After all, it is only a person secure in the knowledge of the rightness of his vision who can go out in the midst of nature, pitch his tent, and live a life of simplicity, thereby concretely demonstrating the validity of his vision. He is certainly not a smiling prophet, cheerfully leaping into the fire, but he is undoubtedly a modern, secular variation on the type, inspired by the religious antecedent. Thoreau, albeit playfully, does fancy himself, at least once, "as one of the elect," when he walks on the railroad with the halo of light around his shadow (332). In the many scenes where he experiences the balance and harmony he was seeking, the tone of self - confidence, of the cognition of a divine stasis, is quite in evidence. In his "Conclusion," after the secular saint had legitimated his vision and submitted his account book, **Walden** becomes both a hymn of praise for the experiment conducted and an exhortation for people to

emulate, not to follow, his example. The voice of the narrator, self - confident throughout, assumes an unmistakable religio - lyrical tone.

In the unified world of Calvinism, there was one unalterable central fact: "God's presence in the world" (Horton and Edwards, 1967; 42)-- both in physical nature and in man's unfolding history. God, it is argued, is "all powerful.... The first cause of everything.... His hand is ever at work in the world." (Horton and Edwards, 1967: 21) It is His presence in nature and history that gives them both meaning and coherence. Probably, it is that belief in an order behind the fluctuating phenomena, a correspondential view of nature, that released the scientific, empirical impulse in Occidental man, and it is probably a related conviction that led the Transcendentalists, with Thoreau among them, to see nature as an embodiment of eternal verities and of a divine order. Thoreau's scientific investigations are not at all divorced from his mystic interest; it is probably for that reason that he adamantly refused to be labeled a mere natural scientist. His "mysticism," on the other hand, does not leave the ground or the rich details of nature and reality.

God's presence in history, the assumed unity of the world, and the anxiety of the believer to detect signs of his salvation (or damnation) generated a basically allegorical view of reality or a "symbolizing **process**" (Feidelson, 1953: 78) to use Feidelson's phrase. All objects or events were inherently meaningful and, upon close scrutiny, they yielded their moral: "The unfolding drama was at once human and divine; physical life was simultaneously spiritual. Every passage of life, enmeshed in the vast context of God's plan, possessed a delegated meaning." (Feidelson, 1953: 78). This aspect of the Protestant imagination is well manifested in Thoreau's work. He does not tire of drawing moral analogies from natural and historical phenomena. The argument of **Walden** is frequently developed through a number of parables that vary in length. Each chapter has more or less the air of a sermon, in which the preacher takes a text or a thesis that he develops, elaborates, and illustrates. The life-style of the saint of Walden demonstrates its practical validity. This correspondential view can probably account for the apparent contradictoriness of Thoreau's views and style: vacillating from the pantheism and naturalism of "Sounds" to the transcendence and asceticism of "Higher Laws." But the larger meaning of **Walden** should be seen as encompassing both the physical detail and the lurking implications.

Thoreau's whole view of history is colored by his Puritan training in the

providential view of history, where the whole of history is scrutinized by the protagonist and judged by a presumably timeless ethical criterion--for instance, when he considers the matter of the Egyptian Pyramids, rather than place them in their historical context, he judges them in terms of his view of simplicity and luxury. As Thoreau puts it, he is not interested in those who built the pyramids, mere absurd monuments, but rather in those people who, conforming to his moral ideas of simplicity, were above such trivialities (194).

Thoreau's Calvinist-Protestant sensibility is manifested in various other themes of **Walden**. His demand for sincerity is seen, for instance, by Adams as "a part of (his) Puritan integrity." (Harding, 1970: 120) His denunciation of what he did not believe in "as not only foolish but sinful" is seen by Van Doren as another mark of this Puritanism (Doren, 1961: 55 - 56). Krutch finds that his insistence on "purity" derives from this Puritan outlook. (Krutch, 1974: 197) Probably Krutch is referring to the unmistakably Puritan passage in **Walden** about chastity where Thoreau speaks of "the generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean." Thoreau then adds that "chastity is the flowering of man" and that "man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open" (347).

Earlier it was noted that protestantism viewed itself as an open-ended process; "(i)t stood for a principle of protest that calls under judgement not only the beliefs and institutions of others but also one's own movements and causes (Protestantism, The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974). In that sense, the Protestant is a true, endless seeker and an eternal reformer. But what enhanced this feeling and reinforced it is the deep sense of radical evil and the "total depravity" of the world and man (Miller, 1967:14) and, also, the deep sense of an omnipresent, transcendental God. If the world is totally fallen, and if man's life is a continuous stewardship in the service of an omnipresent, transcendental God, probably coupled also with a sense of election, then a desire to conquer the world in the name of that transcendental God is generated. Man goes out in the world not to enjoy it but to conquer it, so that it, too, may be regulated in conformity with the transcendental, yet inaccessible God. The Transcendentalist, despite his quietism, launched himself upon the world to reform it. Like his Puritan predecessors, he knew that "to save one's soul is a matter of man's best effort." But one's salvation is seen in terms of a perpetual effort to found the kingdom of God on earth. This reformist, even revolutionary, impulse is true of Transcendentalism in general. Miller was referring to this trait when he

described the "transcendental episode" as "not all dreamy and not all benignity." (Miller, 1967: 14) He argues further that the Transcendental critique of Unitarian Boston became also "a critique of State Street and investment banking." (Miller, 1967:13)

Thoreau's attitude toward the world might seem to be again quietist in some moments, but the more representative moments are those when he launches himself upon the world. In many of the pantheistic passages, he casts aside any sense of radical evil or of basic dualism in the world, with the forces of good pitted against the forces of evil. But that pantheistic quietism is not always accepted without questioning. The Canadian wood-chopper, a man completely immersed in nature, with no moral burdens to speak of, is a good case in point. When asked whether he wanted to change the world or not, the natural man's answer was simple and straightforward: "No, I like it well enough." Thoreau then wonders whether he is "as wise as Shakespeare or as simply ignorant as a child" (277-278).

One can even argue that the quietist strain is not as central nor as typical of Thoreau as his "professedly reformatory" posture. (Stoller, 1957:111) Parrington recognizes that Thoreau's, like the Puritan's, was a salvationist religion, but, unlike the Puritans, Thoreau refused to sacrifice his high spiritual mission to the economic one. His program was an attempt to recover the higher ideal "by sacrificing the economic to the spiritual" (Parrington, 1930 : 403) Hyman, in "Henry Thoreau in Our Time," argues that Thoreau is "the clearest voice for social ethics that ever spoke out in America", (Hyman, 321) and he enumerates the extensive themes that Thoreau touched upon: "the New England textile factory system," "the degradation of the labouring class of his time," "the lack of dignity and privacy in the lives of factory girls," "the human consequences of commerce and technology," and "the greed and corruption of the money-mad New England of his day." (Hyman, 322).

Even his withdrawal into nature was not an escape, it was more an attempt at self-renewal with the hope that out of his withdrawal would come "a higher, a spiritually or inwardly formed society." Nature was "a re-creative process of spiritualization, whereby one sharpened his sight and discovered again.. the possibilities and the principles of a new world." (Paul, 1958: 305 - 306) Stanley, in **The Making of Walden**, views the book as an "autobiographical narrative" set in the frame of an overall argument that aims at showing people how wrong their assumptions about living are and

how poor their lives are (Stanley, 1957 : 76).

Indeed, the Thoreau we remember most is not merely a man in nature, but a man in nature living a deliberately simple life, that he may demonstrate to mankind the fallacy of its ways, past and present, in America or in India. He went to the woods so he might say something about man's "outward condition... in this world, in this town" and whether it could be "improved" (146) or not. The alternative model Thoreau suggests was not a theoretical construct, it was a model tested on the very pulses of the philosopher. In that sense Thoreau was fulfilling his own preachings that, rather than study an abstract "**political** economy," one is better off studying "that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy" (188), for "to be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, not even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates" (155).

Thoreau's reformist zeal is so great that he becomes both the message and messenger, the mission and missionary. The philosopher should preach and practice a new style of life, for how can he claim to be a philosopher when he is "fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries"? (156). The tone of exhortation and moral indignation, the homilies, the parables, the innumerable illustrations, and the minuteness and precision of his account book show his deep concern for the salvation of his soul and those of his countrymen. One of the most memorable images of **Walden** is that of the hero as a chanticleer bragging lustily in the morning, "standing on his roost if only to wake my neighbours" (216). The image, with its paradoxical religious and secular overtones, with its evocation of a rugged individualism and harmonious communalism, is a concrete expression of Thoreau's standpoint--a secular humanist outlook whose roots lie deep in New England Protestantism. A true saint he was, who, having imbibed Protestant values and premises, launched himself upon the secular world, accosting it on its own secular terms, demonstrating to it, through exhortation, fact, and action, a remedy for its deep fallacy and profound emptiness.

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