

Angels in Milton and Rembrandt

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Abstract

17世紀の同時代アーティストであるイギリスの詩人ミルトンとオランダの画家レンブラントには時代を反映する同じ力が働いている。それは反宗教改革のキャンペーンであるバロック様式の強烈的な影響を受けつつ、絢爛豪華で劇的な外面美を内面美に向けたことである。二人の間には直接の交流はなかったものの、カルヴァンの教義“Sola scriptura”に忠実に、「目に見えない神聖なものの視覚化」を避けて表現し、創作するという共通要素がある。さらに、二人が同時代の他の芸術家から異なる顕著な共通点は二人が内面の目を重要視し、創作にもその姿勢を貫いていることである。本論では、その創作態度を二人が特に関心を寄せた天使に焦点を当てて解明する。ミルトンの詩においてもレンブラントの絵画においても、光と闇、白と黒の世界が主調となり、キアロスクーロが駆使され、独創的な天使像が描き出される。

Keywords: angels, Milton, Rembrandt, Sola Scriptura, Baroque

Introduction

John Milton, the seventeenth-century English poet, and Rembrandt van Rijn, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter, were complete contemporaries. Milton lived from 1608 to 74, and Rembrandt's dates were 1606-69. Both left masterpieces of art, Milton with language and Rembrandt with line and color. Mario Praz said, "There is much point in showing the same forces at work in artists belonging to the same phase of history"⁽¹⁾. A parallel study between this poet and this painter seems

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definitely worthwhile.

Their age was being swept by the tide of the Baroque style, the campaign of the Catholic Counter Reformation. Artists created works in accordance with the Pope's wishes, which encouraged altarpieces and theatrical and dramatic paintings of God. The works of Rubens (1577-1640), Caravaggio (1571?-1610), Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), Claude Lorrain (1600-82) and others were magnificent and splendid, displaying the Baroque style outwardly. Although Milton and Rembrandt were affected by the Baroque current, they, as Protestant artists on the side of the Reformation, observing the strict restraint of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which forbade any visualization of God, created their works on *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone: the Reformation slogan). Theirs was an inward Baroque appreciation and their works reflect their religious beliefs.

In this paper, I demonstrate that similarity in the ways these artists chose to represent angels.

Joad Raymond says (*Milton's Angels*, 48), "Protestant angelology was shaped by the emphasis on *sola scriptura* and by a reaction against Catholicism" and "The differences between Protestants and Catholics on the theology of angels can be reduced to a series of headings, though doing so risks making the doctrines on both sides seem more undifferentiated than in reality it was." But "Protestants were very interested in angels, despite the reservations expressed by Calvin, Luther, and others (Raymond, 4)." On the other hand, Robert West summarizes the difference into the three points (*Milton and Angels*, 49).

To three points of Catholic angelology, however, many Protestants were outspokenly irreconcilable. The prolific Hertfordshire clergyman, Andrew Willet, lists the three in one of his influential writings against Papistry published about the same time as Salkeld's book: first, Catholics follow the Pseudo-Dionysius on his nine orders and even "charge infidelitie and blasphemie" to those who doubt him, whereas Protestants, though admitting order among angels, think those rash who say exactly what it is; second, Catholics hold that every man has a guardian angel assigned to him at his birth, whereas Protestants, though sure of the protection of angels for the elect, doubt individual assignment; finally, Catholics allow a certain adoration of angels, but Protestants forbid all worship of any kind to them (*Milton and Angels*, 49).

But at the same time he says that Milton did not mind transcending those borders.

To say, then, that the angelology in *Paradise Lost* is predominantly Puritan is not to deny that ideas from quite other sorts of authorities are prominent in it, but only to decide that the evidence from the *Christian Doctrine* and from *Paradise Lost* itself shows that the angelology which retains in *Paradise Lost* some sort of doctrinal standing is the Puritan. Whereas the rest of it is for decoration or the forwarding of the story or for the making of some special point that in itself transcends angelology (*Milton and Angels*, 180-81).

Before elucidating the individual views and features of angels in Milton and Rembrandt, let us find how the Scriptures describe angels. The Scriptures never depict the detailed appearance of angels or show if they are winged. We just imagine their wings when we are told that they go up to heaven. But it is certain that in the Scriptures, unlike God Himself, angels appear visibly to humankind. *The Christian Iconography* says that from the time of Ezekiel we find that the winged human form, resplendent in light and color, is the most usual representation of an angel offered to us in poetry and art (*The Christian Iconography*, vol. II, 89). In the Bible Ezekiel describes cherubim in 1: 4-28 and in 11: 22.

And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings.... and their wings were stretched upward; two wings of every one were joined one to another, and two covered their bodies. And they went every one straight forward: whither the spirit was to go, they went; and they turned not when they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning (Ezekiel, 1: 4-13).

Then, did the cherubims lift up their wings, and the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above (Ezekiel, 11: 22).

Other examples from the Bible are Genesis (3: 24) and Exodus (25: 18 & 20). In 6: 2 & 6 Isaiah saw seraphim with six wings.

he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword
(Genesis, 3: 24).

And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make
them, in the two ends of the mercy seat (Exodus, 25: 18).

And cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat
with their wings (Exodus, 25: 20).

Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his
face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly (Isaiah, 6: 2 & 6).

(1) Milton's angels

Paradise Lost offers a collection of Milton's angels. He called them angels or archangels, cherubim or seraphim, mixing the angelic hierarchy as he preferred. Angels' hierarchy is a Catholic concept, but it is classified by Dionysius the Areopagite (In 1st century AD, Greek churchman. His conversion by St. Paul is recorded in Acts (17: 34) and became the first bishop of Athens.) following passages in St. Paul's epistles to the Ephesians (1: 20) and Colossians (1: 16).

Counselors [Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones], Governors [Dominations, Virtues, Powers], Ministers [Principalities, Archangels, Angels] (*The Christian Iconography*, vol. II, 98).

And Milton did not hesitate mentioning it.

Hear all ye angels, progeny of light,
Thrones, dominations, principedoms, virtues, powers,
Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand. (PL 5: 600-3)

Among others, the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are the chosen heroes of *Paradise Lost*, with an addition of Uriel: "The archangel Uriel, one of the seven (3: 648)." However, detailed descriptions are rarely made of individual angels. Instead, spectacular and magnificent pictures of a host, or crowd, of angels are drawn.

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The multitude of angels with a shout
Loud as from numbers without number, sweet
As from blest voices, uttering joy, heaven rung
With jubilee, and loud hosannas filled
The eternal regions: lowly reverent
Towards either throne they bow, and to the ground
With solemn adoration down they cast
Their crowns inwove with amarant and gold,... (PL 3: 345-52)

Nor delayed the winged saint
After his charge received; but from among
Thousand celestial ardours, where he stood
Veiled with his gorgeous wings, up springing light
Flew through the midst of heaven; the angelic choirs
On each hand parting, to his speed gave way
Through all the empyreal road; (PL 5: 247-53)

Either individually or collectively, angels are presented as a dazzlingly bright light of gold, because angels were said to be made of light: "Hear all ye angels, progeny of light" (PL 5: 600). Milton also had a perfect command of chiaroscuro, the contrast of light and darkness. Indeed, the whole world of *Paradise Lost* exists in the contrast of light and dark. Heaven and Hell develop a majestic chiaroscuro (3: 56-70).

Most of the angels in *Paradise Lost* are depicted collectively as a host or crowd (3: 344-49 and 4: 977-85). Only four of them are presented with individual and detailed descriptions. Uriel makes the first appearance standing in the sun (3: 622-28), based on the account of the Apocalypse (19: 7). His body shines gold in the sun. He is "the angel bright" (3: 645) with "radiant visage" (3: 646).

whereby he soon
Saw within ken a glorious angel stand,
The same whom John saw also in the sun:
His back was turned, but not his brightness hid;
Of beaming sunny rays, a golden tiar
Circled his head, nor less his locks behind

Illustrious on his shoulders fledge with wings
Lay waving round; (PL 3: 621-28)

The second portrayal of an individual angel is Satan disguised as a cherub. He asks Uriel the way to Paradise (3: 636-50). Since cherubim are said to excel in knowledge, the disguise is appropriate.

And now a stripling cherub he appears,
Not of the prime, yet such as in his face
Youth smiled celestial, and to every limb
Suitable grace diffused, so well he feigned;
Under a coronet his flowing hair
In curls on either cheek played, wings he wore
Of many a coloured plume sprinkled with gold,
His habit fit for speed succinct, and held
Before his decent steps a silver wand. (PL 3: 636-44)

Alastair Fowler comments that Edmund Spenser's description of a young angel, in *Faerie Queene* casts a reflection on "stripling" and "youth."

a faire young man,
Of wondrous beautie, and of freshest years...
His snowy front curled with golden heares,
Like Phoebus face adorn'd with sunny rayes,
Divinely shone, and two sharpe winged sheares,
Decked with diverse plumes, like painted Jayes,
Were fixed at his backe, to cut his ayerie ways. (II, viii, 5)

Spenser adopted "a young man" from St. Mark: "And entering in the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment" (16: 5). West has a different opinion: "If Milton had any kind of warrant for this, it is certainly from art, not from angelology, whose authorities often complain of the artist's liberty in showing ageless angels as children or young men." (*Milton and Angels*, 104) His plumes are colorful, but overall the wings are gold. Possibly, Milton was reminded of

the "golden-winged Iris" in the *Iliad* (viii 398 and xi 185).

Thirdly, Raphael appears as a seraph with three pairs of wings, based upon Isaiah (6: 2). His flight reflects that of the Phoenix in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (xv 391-407). The colors of the three pairs of wings are fascinating, not too gorgeous. The first pair of wings is purple (=regal); the second is gold; the third is sky-tinctured (=blue). According to Fowler, these colors were taken from the Phoenix in Pliny: "All these colours together with the description *downy*, seem to have been taken from the elaborate account of the plumage of the phoenix in Pliny (*Nat. hist.* x 2)". But the account of Exodus, "Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet; with cherubims of cunning work shalt thou make them (26: 1)," has good reason to be remembered. Also, a passage from the *Aeneid*, "To the winner he gave a cloak embroidered with gold and edged with a double key-pattern of Meliboean purple (v 250-51)," has no little influence. Milton called the color of purple "regal," reminding us of the attire of kings, heroes, and knights of the ancient and medieval periods and adding dignity or solemnity to his angels. Only Raphael among the angels in *Paradise Lost* is given three pairs of fresh wings with the colors of purple, gold and blue, while his whole frame shines with gold.

till within soar

Of towering eagles, to all the fowls he seems
A phoenix, gazed by all, as that sole bird
When to enshrine his relics in the sun's
Bright temple, to Aegyptian Thebes he flies.
At once on the eastern cliff of Paradise
He lights, and to his proper shape returns
A seraph winged; six wings he wore, to shade
His lineaments divine; the pair that clad
Each shoulder broad, came mantling o'er his breast
With regal ornament; the middle pair
Girt like a starry zone his waist, and round
Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold
And colours dipped in heaven; the third his feet
Shadowed from either heel with feathered mail

Sky-tinctured grain. Like Maia's son he stood,
And shook his plumes, that heavenly fragrance filled
The circuit wide. (PL 5: 270-87)

Both the beginning and the ending lines of the passage about Raphael's arrival are supplied with pagan images. Its first five lines are about the Phoenix, and the finishing three lines are about Maia's son (=Mercury). Maia's son is a pagan messenger, who functions as "the ambassador of the god" or "the herald." In his pagan imagery Milton uses freely his profound knowledge of the classics. Raphael's figure calls up splendidly mixed images of paganism and Christianity. His role is very significant as an instructor for Adam and Eve, revealing to them the Creation before the creation of Paradise, the revolt of Satan and the war in Heaven. Raphael has also been universally loved as a guardian angel. Milton exceptionally promoted him, probably because of his own special attachment to the Book of Tobit. The Attendant Spirit in *Comus* also reminds us of Raphael.

The fourth individually depicted angel, Michael, appears not as an angel but as a man without wings. He is armed as a valiant warrior, suggestive of Homeric or Hesiodic heroes and of Virgilian or Arthurian knights.

the archangel soon drew nigh,
Not in his shape celestial, but as man
Clad to meet man; over his lucid arms
A military vest of purple flowed
Livelier than Meliboean, or the grain
Of Sarra, worn by kings and heroes old
In time of truce; Iris had dipped the woof;
His starry helm unbuckled showed him prime
In manhood where youth ended; by his side
As in a glistering zodiac hung the sword,
Satan's dire dread, and in his hand the spear. (PL 11: 238-48)

As the line "kings and heroes old/ In time of truce" clearly expresses, Michael is a pagan hero or a medieval knight. At the same time, his attire of helmet ("His starry helm" 11: 245), spear and sword calls up the image of Archangel Michael subjugating

the Dragon (Satan), as in Guido Reni's painting.

Only Gabriel, among the three archangels, is not individually depicted in *Paradise Lost*. At the time of its writing Gabriel had been painted with the Virgin Mary in numberless paintings of the Annunciation. There had been virtually no painters who had not responded to that subject. However, neither Milton nor Rembrandt seemed interested in either the Annunciation or in Gabriel. As the Annunciation would be an anachronism in *Paradise Lost*, Milton made Gabriel a regimental adjutant of the heavenly army ("Chief of the angelic guards" 4: 550).

Go Michael of celestial armies prince,
And thou in military prowess next
Gabriel, lead forth to battle these my sons
Invincible, lead forth my armed saints
By thousands and by millions ranged for fight; (PL 6: 44-48)

He is called "The warlike angel" (4: 902) or "the warrior angel" (4: 946). Since Gabriel's etymology is 'God is mighty,' the expression "where the might of Gabriel fought" (6: 355) is appropriate (Incidentally, Michael's etymology is 'Who is like the God?' and Raphael's 'God heals.'). Gabriel's individual figure is not shown, but he is set in the scene with splendid effect of chiaroscuro.

Betwixt these rocky pillars Gabriel sat
Chief of the angelic guards, awaiting night;
About him exercised heroic games
The unarmed youth of heaven, but nigh at hand
Celestial armory, shields, helms, and spears,
Hung high with diamond flaming, and with gold. (PL 4: 549-54)

Milton described angels or the angelic army faithfully following the accounts of the Scriptures and avoiding the Catholic iconography. On his angels' heads there are neither nimbi nor haloes. He seemed to enjoy creating freely his own unique figures of angels within the Calvinistic restrictions, adding a pagan touch.

A person who found himself in the mid-seventeenth century wanting to say

something of angels, not in a systematic way but in a way to appeal imaginatively to many sorts of thinkers without seriously affronting any, and at the same time wanting to keep inviolate his own views, could find enough overlap of thought and enough ambiguity of expression to be easily safe most of the time. Most important to him would be a devout use of the Bible; then for detail that the Bible did not cover, he had his choice of dozens of authorities for whatever kind of show he wanted to make and need not care too much whether they were compatible in their whole doctrines (*Milton and Angels*, 99).

(2) Rembrandt's angels

Rembrandt depicted no Michaels and only two drawings of Gabriel. Like Milton, his favorite angel was Raphael in the Book of Tobit. He made fifty-five drawings, etchings and paintings of Raphael. But also like Milton, he showed little interest in the Annunciation, a theme with which famous painters like Fra Angelico, Filippino Lippi, Piero della Francesca, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Caravaggio, Rubens, Lastman and Strozzi⁽²⁾ grappled. He did leave two unusual and extraordinary drawings of the Annunciation: one in 1635 was composed with Gabriel embracing a perplexed Mary from behind with his widespread wings in a very Baroque style; another in 1651 was set in a scene of an unusually large and high-ceilinged room with a hearth over which a kettle hangs (it looks like a kitchen), and Gabriel is shown descending in a cloud with hands spread toward Mary, who is kneeling.

Rembrandt gave unnamed angels important messages from the Old Testament. They include three angels who visited Abraham, the angel who stopped Abraham's hand from sacrificing Isaac, the angel who wrestled with Jacob, the angel who announced Samson's birth to his father, Manoa, and Raphael in the Book of Tobit. In the New Testament he painted unidentified the angel announcing Christ's nativity to the shepherds, the angel who in a dream told Joseph to accept Mary as his wife and to fly to Egypt, and the angel who announced Jesus' Resurrection. He seemed consciously to choose subjects to which his contemporary artists paid little attention.

Among them, the angels in 'Abraham and the Three Angels' (1646) and 'The Resurrection of Christ' (1639) are masterpieces filled with light and darkness. Since one of the three angels in the former is God Himself, that angel occupies the whole scene with dazzlingly spread wings. The latter is depicted as if its light had exploded in the darkness. As the Scripture says, the angel announcing the resurrection of⁽³⁾

Jesus spreads wings of light over the scene. Such composition or representation had never occurred to any other painters. Certainly, Rembrandt avoided the Catholic depictions of Christ rising triumphantly from the grave. His angels are composed only of light, with colors and lines of white, gold or amber. They are so ethereal and immaterial that they could be said to be closer to works in words.

Instead of the Annunciation to Mary, there are two Rembrandt paintings of an angel announcing Christ's coming birth to Joseph. 'The Dream of Joseph 1650-55' shows an angel telling him to accept pregnant Mary. In 'The Dream of Joseph in the Stable in Bethlehem 1645,' an angel holding his shoulders whispers to Joseph that he and Mary must escape to Egypt. Both angels are unnamed, inconspicuous and obscure. They are depicted with light as the focus in their dark paintings. The effect of chiaroscuro is remarkable. Other painters made innumerable paintings of the holy family in the stable or of the flight to Egypt, but almost no one paid any attention to the announcing angels. The most famous of Rembrandt's angels is the one who seizes Abraham's hand about to sacrifice Isaac in 'The Sacrifice of Isaac 1635.' He is unnamed and obscure, but his message and function are extremely important. His movement with widespread wings is Baroque. Rembrandt did not depict the angel who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, but Moses in 'Moses with the Tables of the Law 1659' reflects God's glory in the skin of his own face. Rembrandt successfully showed the ineffable God within a reflection on a face of a human being.

Rembrandt's angels are different from the magnificent and glorious angels of Catholic Renaissance and Baroque painters. Both the lines and colors of their wings and costumes are very simple and plain. Nevertheless, spreading out their wings over a scene and moving vigorously, Rembrandt's angels convey a Baroque style. Always light is irradiated on the angels' faces and wings against dark backgrounds, producing his typical striking effect.

The Book of Tobit is the story in the apocryphal Scripture which has blindness as its core. After the 1619 Synod of Dordrecht the Apocrypha were no longer to be considered true Scripture. Raphael chaperons Tobias and cures Tobit's blindness. Despite the difference between the beliefs of the Catholic and Protestant guardian angels, as West indicates, Raphael never fell out of favor with either Milton or Rembrandt.

Both Rembrandt and Milton were especially interested in Tobit's blindness, and, by

extension, Samson's and Homer's. Rembrandt made numerous drawings, etchings and paintings of blind Tobit and of blind old men, including Homer and his own father, the father in 'The Return of the Prodigal Son 1666/69.' 'The Archangel Raphael Taking Leave of the Tobit Family 1637' is a powerful and impressive painting with the angel going up to Heaven after the miraculous achievement of blindness cured. It is not a coincidence that a year before Rembrandt had painted 'Blinding of Samson 1636.' Simeon in 'Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple,' left on the canvas after his death, looks blind, too. Of course, Milton's similar interest in blindness produced his painful and sublime tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*.

Conclusion

Milton and Rembrandt maintained their positions sticking to their Protestant beliefs against the turbulent billows of the Counter Reformation, each in his own country, England and Holland. There is hardly any evidence of any interchange between them, even of mutual recognition. Though Milton's name was well known in Holland because of his controversy with Salmasius (*Defensio pro populo Anglicano*), while Milton said in *Defensio Pro Se* he esteemed highly Dutch industry, arts and liberty. However, they had themes and problems in common in their similar religious, political and cultural environments beyond the national boundaries, and both of them crystallized their ideas and experiences in masterpieces of art.

Neither of them, based faithfully upon the *Institutes* of Calvin, made any visualizations of God in their arts of language, and line and color. Though the visualization of God was forbidden, that of the angel, the messenger of God, sacred next to God was rather free and not strictly forbidden. In the Old Testament, the boundary between God Himself and God's Messenger is occasionally unclear and hazy. One of the three angels who visited Abraham, one who wrestled with Jacob, and one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush proved to be God Himself.

Milton created sublime and solemn angels, adding pagan images to the Biblical, whereas Rembrandt completed his images of angels with domesticity, homeliness and guardianship, exactly as a Netherlander. Neither of them, avoiding the Catholic iconography, presented the sacred images with dramatic decoration. They made the most of the effect of light and chiaroscuro. That light came from the inner light, which they pursued with their inner eyes.

Both Milton and Rembrandt groped for the inner sight and light. For Milton, whose physical eyesight was completely lost half way through his life, it was the path of afflictions.

For Milton, the prophetic sight that comes with physical blindness is a gift, but not in the traditional apophatic sense. Like a mystic, the Miltonic bard also retreats inwardly and then begins to ascend, but at the point where his inner eye meets the unmediated radiance of God's 'unapproached light' we do not encounter the paradox of dark splendor, ... (Noam Reisner. *Milton and the Ineffable*. 185)

On the other hand, Rembrandt seemed not only to have had the fear of being blind hereditarily because of his father's blindness (Julius S. Held, 'Rembrandt and the Book of Tobit,' in *Rembrandt Studies*, 118-143), but also, already as early as in 1626, he had shown interest in the force of interior vision, painting three histories exemplifying it.

All his life, Rembrandt would be fixated on the idea of spiritual, inner blindness, even among those who supposed their physical vision to be acute. This was but one of the qualities which set him apart so drastically from the mainstream of Dutch painting, ... His own perception, even in his stripling years, was shockingly acute, ... But he was already haunted by a paradox. The light that came to us in the clarity of the day, that led us to embrace the material, visible world, was a gift of immense power, but it faded into insignificance beside the other light, the interior light of the Gospel truth, the enabler of in-sight, especially strong in Protestant culture.... (Schama, Simon. *Rembrandt's Eyes*. 238)

Their works of art produced from the inner light and eye turned the Baroque style inward, in complete contrast to the Counter Reformation Baroque which displayed divine images, theatrically, outward.

Notes

- (1) Mario Praz, 'Milton and Poussin', *Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Sir Herbert*

- Grierson*. New York: Octagon Books INC. 1967, 193.
- (2) Fra Angelico (1400?-55), Filippino Lippi (1457?-?1504), Piero della Francesca (1420?-92), Michelangelo (1475-1564), Raphael (1483-1520), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Caravaggio (1571?-1610), Rubens (1577-1640), Lastman (1583-1633), and Strozzi (Bernardo, c. 1581-1644).
- (3) St. Matthew 28: 2-6 "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead *men*. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."

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