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Beyond Witness: Poetry's
Engagement with Reality

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Beyond Witness: Poetry's Engagement with Reality

We are children of our times just as a Vyasa, Valmiki or Chaucer or the man who wrote *Beauwolf* were children of their times. There may be an aberration like Franz Kafka (whose work seemed to transcend time, whose work was one long metaphor) but otherwise writers hunker down to their decades. And they wrestle with the realities of their age, much in the same way as scientists or boat pilots do. You basically navigate the times. So reality changes from age to age, and along with it the perception of reality. The term reality originated in 1550—a legal term in the sense of 'fixed property'. It comes from the mediaeval Latin *realitas* or from the late Latin *realis*. The definitions are many: 'The state of things as they actually exist, as opposed idealistic or notional idea of them.' Another: 'The state or quality of having existence or substance.' A definition associated with philosophy talks of reality as: 'Existence that is absolute, self-sufficient, or objective and not subject to human decisions or conventions'. And let's not forget Einstein who said 'Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.'

I am not using the term reality here as opposed to belief or hypothesis. For many people, reality would include belief systems. Not for me. For the mediaeval mind, witches and the Devil were real. So were angels and heretics. Sir Thomas Moore had six of them burnt on the stake. In Oxford, I lived on St. Giles Road on which Archbishop Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer were burnt at the stake by Queen Mary Tudor. The suicide bombers of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda perhaps really believe in heaven and the seventy odd Houris promised to martyrs. So they were a part of reality. For Indian right wingers today, plastic surgery

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and inter-planetary travel were common during Vedic times . It becomes a part of their reality. So for them we could shift Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) to 'I am what I believe in'. But for this talk we are not taking beliefs or belief systems into account.

Literature has to work with reality, not necessarily within, but around. It has no other option. So epics are crowded with all kinds of gods and demons. The writers, good novelists and fantasizers all of them, must have thought they were around, even if invisible. In the process, literature has to retune reality. Fiction and drama do that. Poetry has a double task—it also has to re-tune language. Now that itself opens up a very wide field. How does a writer of witness poetry change or re-tune language? Not by wearing his heart on his sleeve, surely. But I will come to this later.

Poetry has handicaps—space, elbow room, expectations of readers. A poet is not a landscape gardener of our existential mire. He can just manage a patch. We all work within the confines of our disciplines. A poet does not have to mirror reality as a novelist does. I think it was Balzac who said (I quote from cobwebbed memory) that a novel is a mirror that travels the road. To put the record straight, fiction is both a mirror and an escape from reality. Mirror means reflection, and that itself takes us into dubious territory. For witness poetry, the poem itself becomes fact, replaces reality. By no means can you insult it by calling it a reflection. A quote from Roland Barthes is worth attention: 'Contemporary poetry is a regressive semiological system...it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: it's ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves.'¹

Poetry rewinds and re-tunes reality differently from fiction or drama. It assimilates —what for want of a better word—we will call the real, through a prism of its own senses or the soul and produces, or should produce, something totally different. In other words, poetry also has to transcend reality; and the binaries of dream and imagination , dream and reality, have to come into play. To put it differently, the external becomes interiorised.

Once the existence of God became doubtful to the west, the compact family of God and his creations, the angelic orders, stars and planets and human beings, each in their appointed places, fell apart. The binaries also fell by the wayside—natural and supernatural, heaven and earth, and the platonic idea of our world being a replica of an ideal world. Man lost his importance and became a mere splinter of a splintered world. Meanwhile, poetry waded through two bloody wars, the like of which had never been seen before, and two atomic bombs and many gas chambers. And it had to go through a lot of nihilism. Yet, the spirit of man and the spirit of poetry being such, they have crossed many of these hurdles in these seventy years since the War. So before I come exclusively to poetry of witness, I want to narrow the field of my talk. I wish to deal with just two strands in this vast and endless weave called poetry: the ones who are looking inward, into the self, and the ones who confront external reality and leave it there.

Meanwhile, poetry waded through two bloody wars, the like of which had never been seen before, and two atomic bombs and many gas chambers. And it had to go through a lot of nihilism. Yet, the spirit of man and the spirit of poetry being such, they have crossed many of these hurdles in these seventy years since the War.

A caveat needs to be added. No really good poet is stuck to one of these categories. For instance, T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* which followed his personal collapse. He was given three month's leave from the bank, during which he wrote the poem. There was also the political and economic chaos following the First World War. But the poem also puts forth "Eliot's ideas about the relationship of the contemporary world to the history and values of a broad range of past cultures as expressed through the poem's multiple and complex allusions to anthropology and literature".² If poets are multi-faceted like most human beings are, so is their poetry. Eliot has the inward eye but can paint a scene as only he can.

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In 1945, Eliot wrote, 'A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him.' In a 1943 lecture, he emphasised the duty of a poet 'is only indirectly to the people: his direct duty is to his own language, first to preserve and second to extend and improve.' No wonder Igor Stravinsky said of him that he 'was not only a great sorcerer of words but the very key keeper of the language.' The inward gaze was very much in evidence always. He says in 'Ash Wednesday' (1930):

And I pray that I may forget
Those matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again

The clamour of the world, and what we are calling reality here, was anathema to him. Take these lines from *Ash Wednesday*:

Against the World the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word...
Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence...

A later line states: 'No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice.' In fact, Eliot's sensibility and intelligence were on such a high plane that he could not be expected to deal with reality the way lesser poets would. He could be cynical about relationships. 'Two people who know they do not understand each other,/ Breeding children whom they do not understand/ And who will never understand them...' Still, he goes on to say this is a good life 'in a world of lunacy/ Violence, stupidity, greed.'

Poets who burrow within? Let's take examples near home. Nissim Ezekiel was our first (if not only) major modern poet. His first poem 'A Time to Change', also the title poem of his first book (1952) starts with the lines:

We who leave the house in April, Lord,
How shall we return?
Debtors to the whore of Love,
Corrupted by the things imagined
Through the winter nights, alone,
The flesh defiled by dreams of flesh,
Rehearsed desire dead in spring,
How shall we return?

You can see the influences. He starts in the tradition of the Biblical psalms with an apostrophe to the Lord. And there's the tradition he follows from English literature coming down from Chaucer to Eliot, regarding April (*The Waste Land*):

April is the cruellest month
Breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Then Ezekiel's poem moves on with all the majesty of the Psalms, and yet the stance is anti-heroic, anti-ego in the modernist tradition. He talks of 'Witness to the small rain and sundry mists/ Half-hearted birds, uncertain dawns...' and then 'Sly rust encrusts the aspiration,/ Youth runs out of song.' And what is the aspiration? To

... show his deep affection for the world
with words emerging from a contrite heart
The pure invention or the perfect poem,
Precise communication of a thought.
Love reciprocated to a quiver,
Flawless doctrines, certainty of God,
These are merely dreams, but I am human
And must testify to what they mean.

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And the poem, near its ending carries the refrain five times 'With secret thoughts concealed no more.'

There you have it, the searchlight directed inwards, to 'his contrite heart', uncertain faith, flawed doctrines and most importantly, his personal doubts not only about the existence of God but also the gap between the poetry he was aspiring to, and the actual state of his poetry. He is also adhering to the confessional mode which had come into vogue. In another poem 'Morning Prayer' he says:

God grant me certainty
In kinship with the sky
Air, earth, fire, sea—
And the fresh inward eye.

Let me take another fine English poet A.K. Ramanujan. I have written about him at length. To reduce this very fine poet to one who dealt with external reality, as a contrast to Nissim Ezekiel would be doing a disservice to both poets and also me. (I am not such an opaque critic). Dom Moraes has pointed out that Ramanujan 'fulfilled perhaps...a mission which had earlier been carried out by R.K. Narayan in prose fiction: the transmutation of the South Indian ethos into English literature.'

Ramanujan was by no means a poet of witness. He wrote of family lovingly—as the titles of his poems testify: 'Still Another for Mother', 'Cousins on Swings', 'Lines for a Granny', 'On a Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter', which has nothing to do with jaundice except the colour yellow—sulphur mines, lemon peel, sunflowers. There has to be a twist—'those singing yellows/ in the whites of her eyes,' the near blind grandmother's eyes. In his last book, the view is pretty bleak. 'At Zero' we see 'blank Brahmin-widow face' which 'cannot see anything/ but currents of vapour'.

Visuals, images make him uneasy at times, for instance breaded fish served to him reminds him of dead fish 'rolled by the ebb, breaded/by the grained

indifference of sand. I headed/ for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth.' I noticed just two 'political' poems in his oeuvre, both in his last book, 'Black Hen.' One is of course on Mrs. Indira Gandhi entitled 'A Ruler':

Governing the country from a kitchen sink
she brandishes ladles as the goddess her sword

puts ministers to work like daughters-in law
sorting lentils and votes, slicing the gourd

the big white house is hushed when she takes her nap
but caterpillars and mice gnaw holes in the map

And the Bosnia poem starts with:

How can one write about Bosnia,
Biafra, Bangladesh, just to take
only the atrocities that begin with B.

Poetry of Witness?

The idea of witness has religious connotations, for instance 'Jehovah's Witnesses'. There is also the idea of being a '*Sakshi*' in Hindu philosophy. We need to pull away from these ideas as well as the notion of 'Holocaust testimony' and not confuse these notions with poetry of witness. I will try to give an example—the poem 'Identity Card' by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet. Here are a few stanzas:

Record
I am an Arab
And my identity card is number fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth is coming after a summer
Will you be angry?

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You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors
And the land which I cultivated
Along with my children

And you left nothing for us
Except for these rocks...
So will the State take them...

We need to make a distinction between poetry of witness and committed poetry. Committed poetry could be for a cause. Some of our Dalit poetry could come under that banner. Being witness would imply that you are there, a part of the experience, of the protest, of the victimisation, of being belaboured, beaten. But would that mean that only a person who has come out alive from a concentration camp can write about it? Is it incumbent on a poet writing about the Partition to have migrated carrying head loads in a caravan from Sialkot or Sargodha.

The poem is like a drum of agony being beaten by the poet's verse. It is declaratory, challenging the foe.³ It is not understated in the style of a European poet. Darwish was given the Golden Wreath at Struga in 2007. (Those who remember will recall Vatsyayan (Agyeya) getting the same honour in the early nineteen eighties.) Among many poets, I too read a few poems that year at Struga and so did Carolyn Forché who has translated Darwish.

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Philippe Lacoue –Lebarthe (1940-2007), the French philosopher, wrote a book on Paul Celan and Heidegger entitled *La poesie comme experience (Poetry as Experience)*. Forché states : A poem, in its witnessing, 'arises out of experience that is not perceived as it occurs, is not registered in the first person...' 'So the

person's witness is not a recounting, it is not mimetic narrative, is not political confessionalism, and it (in Lacoue-Labarthe's words) ' is not simply an act of memory. It bears witness, as Jaques Derrida suggests, in the manner of an ethical or political act.'⁴

This poetry has been defined as a type of poetry that attempts to reveal human pain through the art of words. I am reminded of Bertolt Brecht:

In the dark times will there be singing?
Yes, there will be singing
About the dark times.

There was no such thing in the nineteenth century, though we had the Crimean War and the Tennysonian Charge of the Light Brigade. It is not just that in the next hundred years the notions of the heroic went overboard. The poetry of witness flowered in the needlessly spilled blood of the 20th century, and the horrendous, mechanised cruelty that were the saddest part of the trenches during the First World War and the gas chambers and nuclear bombs that characterised the Second World War. Terror and anxiety followed and so did poetry of witness, as it started being called.

Poetry of witness is a twentieth century genre. The practitioner is not a chronicler in the ordinary sense. He is recording his poetry on the witness stand of Time. This poetry has elements both of reportage and camera work also, and is focused more on brutalities—mostly wrought by the state. So elements of protest and revolt come through. The very mention of the brutality is revolt enough. If a photographer comes up with snaps of severed heads left behind by the Islamic state, or the solitary Chinese figure standing in front of advancing tanks at Tiananmen Square, it is statement enough. You need not hold a placard or a banner.

Witness poetry is not reportage, because a good poet has to sieve the horror or even the atmosphere of terror into poetry. There are poets who have transcended the reportage bit, great poets like Anna Akhmatova, Mandelstam and Paul Celan.

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There is the other element, that language may be unable to cope with severed heads and mass murders. Words are but words, can they transcribe such horrors into language? And yet poets cannot abstain from writing about violence. Caribbean poets, especially Lorna Goodison have written about the considerable violence in Jamaica. You can't stop Bangladeshi poets from writing about 1971 and the genocide unleashed by Tikka Khan and the Pakistan army. Nor can you stop them from talking of the massacre at Dhan Mandi of Sheikh Mujib and his family. There is a thin line between committed poetry and poetry of witness.

We in India have also our horrendous partition riots, and our National Emergency. Amrita Pritam wrote her well-known poem in Punjabi 'Aj Akhan Waris Shah Noon':

*Aj akhan Waris Shah noon ki thu kabran wichon bol
Te aj kitab-i-ishq da koi agla warqa phol
Ik roi si dhi Punjab di thu lakh lakh maray vain
Aj lakhan dhiyan rodian tainu Waris Shah noon kahan⁵..*

Much of Indian poetry, dealing with atrocities, is in this vein. Not all. English language poets in India hardly write committed poetry. Rukmini Bhaya Nair is an exception: her *Ayodhya Cantos*. Though the reader would think the book deals entirely with the Babri Masjid episode, there is, for instance, a poem each on all the incarnations of Vishnu in 'The Vishnu Kanda', a rhymed translation of the 'Saraswati Vandana', sections on 'Hanuman Kanda', and 'The Sita Kanda', a poem on Gargi and Ajnavalkya. When I had reviewed the book, I had called it a landmark in Indian poetry in English.

Carolyn Forché, the American poet, has been writing on poetry as witness fairly regularly. She is a fine poet herself and I had an opportunity to read with her at Struga in 2007. She has worked in El Salvador as a 'Documentor of Human Rights.' The Salvador experience changed her. In an interview with the *American Poetry Review*, she was asked 'what happens to language when it is used to

describe—even almost photographically—brutalities that are terrible to describe?’ In answering at length she made a good point that ‘it isn’t enough simply to *recount*, in the linear sense of legal discourse, because the work must also be somehow *redemptive*, and the narrative re-structured.’ There you are. It is another way of saying that poetry is not reportage. Nor is it a horror film in words. If I may add, each genre has to develop its own aesthetics. (It may not be a befitting analogy, but see how the film noir developed, invariably shot in the dark, the low-key dialogue, shadowed lighting and the generally brooding atmosphere.)

We have had battle scenes Homer onwards. Heroes fell like pine or cedar crashing to the ground. Right up to Macaulay’s Battle of Lake Regillus, poets followed the pattern. But Poetry of Witness is not a battle scene. Nor is it reportage. If it is not going to be reportage, what is it going to be? Take Paris. You can describe the attack on Charlie Hebdo or the recent one in prose. But why attempt even that? The television has already brought home the panic and the horror into your bedroom. We poor scribblers can’t do any better, can we? It is here that language, metaphor, nuance and the poet’s sensitivity plays its part.

Actually, American veterans from the wars in Vietnam or Iraq have written poetry with the war as subject, with empathy towards the victims. It is poetry which involves the poet ‘as both actor and acted upon, implicating poetry in a much more directly public and political context than most poetry assumes.’⁶ There are confessions as well. For instance Brian Turner writes in a poem ‘The Discotheque’,

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'It was me Sgt. Turner/ who cracked the night open with explosives/ and wrote it all down, word by word.' I harbour a very slight suspicion of such poetry, even though it is labelled as anti-war, political poetry. A mean thought vexes me, is the empathy a wee bit put on?

The poet needs to transform empathy into poetry. Forche makes a good point. She says: 'Odysseus Elytis whose work I have been recently studying, cautions poets not to attempt to compete with events, nor endure their experiences once in life and a second time in art.' Forche also says that the mode of poetry of witness is 'evidentiary rather than representational—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood'.⁷

Carolyn Forche goes on to add that sometimes the poet, rather his 'first person voice' "could be posting a 'self' to be regarded". So the poet's own anguish, his own recoil from the event could be an intrusion in this kind of poetry. And if you don't wear your anguish on your sleeve, at least in Asia, you would be considered a cold-hearted writer. So the matter is all the time turning curiuser and curiuser. In a lot of 'committed' Indian literature, the self intrudes all the time—and moralising. Partition literature is full of condemnation for the killer, the arsonist, the kidnapper. Forche also quotes Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995) the Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher, who later lived in France,⁸ to the effect that apart from being a lyric art, 'a poetic work is at the same time a document, and the art that went into its making is at once a use of discourse. This discourse deals with objects that are also spoken in the newspapers, posters, memoirs and letters of every passing age.'⁹

Let us not forget the salve element, balm on wounds, the consolatory function of good poetry. 'Nietzche saw art, and Lady Philosophy, as a benign illusion that sustains us in the face of the awful truth, which would cause our eyeballs to protrude from their sockets.'¹⁰

Czeslaw Milosz defined poetry as 'a passionate pursuit of the real.' What distinguished it from journalism was the nature of the passion. I have jotted

down in one of my notebooks after this passage, 'On the one hand, we have self righteousness without art; on the other, art without weight. Between these poles a lot of forgettable writing takes place.' His famous lines on the present subject are contained in his poem 'Dedication' :

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

So for Milosz, the 'salutary aim' is poetry that saves 'nations or people'. I have said elsewhere, 'The self and Poland, sandwiched between the Nazis and the communist soviets, that was the pool from which his entire thought and poetry emerged.' In his famous poem *In Warsaw*, he says:

How can I live in this country
Where the foot knocks against
The unburied bones of kin?

But then he goes on to say in the same poem:

I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot
Write anything; five hands
Seize my pen and order me to write
The story of their lives and deaths.
Was I born
To become a ritual mourner?

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Later he says "I want to sing of festivities... It's madness to live without joy..."

But poets and their poetry, as I have been saying all along, don't have one single identity. No one can be wrapped in one category. The poetry of Milosz oscillated between lyricism and witness, both experiential, one personal and the other social and national.

Before I conclude, I wish to refer to a poem 'The Colonel' by Carolyn Forché: She sets the scene. She is in the lousy colonel's house. 'His daughter filed her nails. His son went out of the house....Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace....We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid.. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread.. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes, say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack ... He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves.'

Then the colonel takes a ear and puts it in a glass of wine. He tells her 'As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves.' Then he sweeps the ears to the floor. He tells her 'Something for your poetry, no? Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice.'

This is witness poetry, at its powerful best. Yeats it was who talked of an equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind. Poetry has a higher calling than standing in the witness box. I don't have to spell it out but wouldn't mind giving an example or two.

If image is text, as photographers would have us believe, then I could do no better than quote T.S. Eliot: 'A pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of silent seas.' Or the lines in the play: 'The last temptation was the greatest treason/ To do the right thing for the wrong reason.' Or take these lines from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*:

O trees of life, when does your winter come?
We are not in harmony, our blood does not forewarn us
like migratory birds. Late, overtaken,
we force ourselves abruptly on to the wind
and fall to earth at some iced-over lake,
Flowering and fading come to us both at once.

End Notes

¹ Rukmini Bhaya Nair, *Poetry in a Time of Terror: Essays on the Postcolonial Preternatural*, Oxford University Press, 2009, Pp18. She (Dr. Nair) goes on to elaborate: 'In poetry, as Barthes points out, word-signs do not refer to other word-signs but are things in themselves.

² Christopher MacGowan, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Blackwell, 2004, Pp66.

³ Mahmoud Darwish was given the Golden Wreath at Struga in 2007. Like many others, I too read a few poems and so did Carolyn Forché, who has also translated Darwish.

⁴ Carolyn Forché, *Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art*, Poetry (Chicago), May 2011, Pp160.

⁵ Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) addresses Waris Shah (1722-1798) who wrote the tragic love poem 'Heer-Ranjha'. The lines quoted here could be translated as, 'I call upon Waris Shah today to speak from his grave/ and un-scroll another page of love./ Once a daughter of Punjab had wept and you wrote endlessly about her/ Today lakhs of daughters are crying out to you.

⁶ Michael Broek, The MFA at War: Proximity, Reality, and Poetry in Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise*, Review article in 'American Poetry Review', September 2011.

⁷ Carolyn Forché, *Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art*, Poetry (Chicago), May 2011, Pp 163.

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⁸ Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), having escaped the holocaust, lived most of his life in France. A part of his philosophy deals with the 'Other'. He requires that a trace of the Divine be acknowledged within an ethics of otherness. And he preferred to think of philosophy as the 'wisdom of love' rather than 'love of wisdom' as the Greek word 'philosophy' means.

⁹ As quoted in Forche's article *Reading the Living Archives*, Poetry (Chicago), May 2011, Pp 162.

¹⁰ Michael Robbins: *Equipment for Living*, Poetry (Chicago).

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in 1937 in Lahore in undivided India. In 1945, his father Professor N.C. Daruwalla retired from Govt. College Lyallpur (now Shah Faizlabad) and moved to Junagadh as Tutor and Guardian to the Prince. His latest novel *Ancestral Affairs* (Harpercollins, 2015) dwells on Junagadh's disastrous accession to Pakistan in 1947. From 1952 -58 he studied in Government College Ludhiana. He picked up his love for English literature and cricket from his father.

Daruwalla joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958. He joined the Cabinet Secretariat and left R&AW as Special Secretary when he was promoted as Secretary and Chairman JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee) in 1993. He served as Member National Commission for Minorities (2011-2014) where he visited and enquired into practically every major communal riot. He was awarded the Padma Shri for his writing in 2014.

He returned his Sahitya Academy Award in 2015 as a protest against its reluctance to take up the cause of rationalist writers murdered by right wing diehards, and also against intolerance of fringe elements belonging to so called 'cultural' factions.

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