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Henry James, Charles Nordhoff, and the Peculiarities of Christian Communes

By 1875, Henry James reached the peak of what has been frequently labeled as the “early phase” of his career. He had published several unsigned and signed stories in magazines such as the *Continental Monthly* or the *Atlantic Monthly*, serialized the novels *Watch and Ward* (1871) and *Roderick Hudson* (1875), and published his first book, *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (1875). He had been writing book reviews for over ten years. His first, anonymous piece had appeared—when he was only 21—in the *North American Review* in 1864. In a now-historical article, “Young Henry James, Critic” (1948), Laurence Barrett argues that even the young James played an important role and made a substantial impact as a reviewer:

Time and again the editors of the highly respected and widely read periodicals for which [James] wrote—the *North American Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Nation*—assigned him the most important review of the issue, the one to which their readers would turn first. He reviewed as they came fresh from the presses the most recent novels of George Eliot, Victor Hugo, Trollope, Kingsley, and Dickens; the poetry of William Morris, Browning, and Tennyson; and the critical writings of Matthew Arnold, Scherer, and Swinburne. His readers would not have known whom they had to thank, for these early reviews went unsigned, but they could hardly have avoided the deep influence of his persuasive arguments. (386)

Notably, James’s reviews of American texts from that time are rarely positive. For example, in 1875 James published several reviews of travel literature, most of which were written in a pejorative tone. James criticized the style of the authors, which was apparently below his standards, and often complained that these Americans did not show a good understanding of the subject, that is, they treated foreigners and foreign customs with arrogant superiority. In the same year, he also wrote about *Eight Cousins*, Louisa May Alcott’s novel for children, which he criticized vehemently as a work unsuitable for young readers (whose sensibilities James rarely seemed sensitive to). However, from time to time, James appeared genuinely interested in the text he was reviewing; in 1874,

for instance, Francis Parkman's historical narrative *The Old Regime in Canada* received James's high praise mainly for its fascinating content. Similarly, another historical study, Charles Nordhoff's *The Communistic Societies of the United States* elicited James's nearly enthusiastic response. His 1875 *Nation* review is detailed, lengthy, and in itself very absorbing. James appears fascinated with Nordhoff's material: he describes the various religious communes, provides the reader with multiple examples of their peculiarities, and treats Nordhoff—the author himself—with seriousness and respect.

First of all, James underlines Nordhoff's scholarly merits, labeling his "researches" "minute and exhaustive" (*Literary Criticism* 560). The writer surely worked hard; he studied the communes all over America: "Mr. Nordhoff's field was extensive, stretching as it does from Maine to Oregon, and southward down to Kentucky" (561). The tone of the study particularly appeals to James. Nordhoff is objective—"professes to take the rigidly economical and not the sentimental view... delightful to the practical mind"; at the same time, he is not morbid or unnecessarily judgmental: "he writes in a friendly spirit and tends rather, on the whole, to dip his pen into rose color" (560). In fact, the realities of communistic¹ life at that time could cause shock, disgust, and even fear. James addresses these issues later in the review, but he makes it clear that such a "rose-color" attitude is most proper when discussing certain monstrosities—they speak for themselves, and while describing them there is no need to adopt an especially scandalized stance: "It would have been possible, we think, for an acute moralist to travel over the same ground as Mr. Nordhoff and to present in consequence a rather duskier picture of human life at Amana, Mount Lebanon, and Oneida; but his work for our actual needs would doubtless have been less useful" (560). We might wonder what "actual needs" James refers to. I would venture to say that it is entertainment and the satisfaction of curiosity, just as it was the case with Parkman's historical narratives about the Jesuits in Canada, which met with young James's approval.² Surely, as Richard Brodhead underlines, "the idea of entertainment" is one of James' most important "conceptual schemes" (110). Distanting himself from the "acute moralist" views, however, James feels obliged to mention that Nordhoff "has not neglected the moral side of his topic." Moreover, his writing "has an extreme psychological interest" (560). The objective distance

1 "Communistic" is used by James and Nordhoff for what we would today call "communal," as relating to a commune, or "communistic" as opposed to "capitalistic," e.g.: "Hitherto, in the United States, our cheap and fertile lands have acted as an important safety-valve for the enterprise and discontent of our non-capitalist population" (Nordhoff).

2 James reviewed Parkman's books *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (1867) and *The Old Regime in Canada* (1874) for the *Nation*.

and the lack of moralizing are James's own rules of writing, just as much as is the presence of psychology and ethical content—the “moral side.”

James's attitude to morality and moralizing calls for a digression here. There was a time when James was said to be free from “moral intentions.” Such modernists as Ford Maddox Ford and T. S. Eliot subscribed to this view (Anesko), which expressed, considering the times they represented, a high praise. Later, ethical concerns came back into fashion: Brodhead called attention to James's “moral or civic function of letters” (110). Yet, critics continue to debate this. In *The Master and the Dean: The Literary Criticism of Henry James and William Dean Howells*, Rob Davidson writes: “Morality was, for James, most often related to questions of form and execution in art” (12); it was “primarily an aesthetic question” (33). Reviewing Davidson's work, Sarah Daugherty argues that

To assert, as Davidson does, that for James morality was ‘primarily an aesthetic question’ is to ignore the critic's struggle with values that resisted conflation. Consider in particular James's attempts to justify his preference for the fiction of George Eliot (morally profound though aesthetically flawed) to that of Flaubert (aesthetically superior but morally inferior). (209)

Commenting on another critic's views, Neill Matheson echoes this opinion: “Poovey's claim that James wants to remove the aesthetic realm from any reference to the ethical flattens out his characteristically rich unsettling of these categories” (“Intimacy and Form”). Whatever significance James ascribes to moral issues in his own fiction, his attitude to morality in the writings of others seems clear—he frequently refers to the reviewed texts' moral content, but he always appears vexed by the author's moralizing, especially in works whose other advantages are feeble. Fortunately, Nordhoff neither moralizes nor appears to be feeble in any other respect.

Reading James's review of *The Communistic Societies*, one might wonder whether it is an assessment of a book or a response to the ideas presented in it. Indeed, it might almost appear that James talks about the communes from his own experience or knowledge; there is so little about the author of the narrative in James's review. He does not refer to Nordhoff much—neither appraises his style nor gives any advice of the kind he offered to Alcott (how to instruct children) or to some travel writers (how to behave in foreign lands). Ultimately, the review of *The Communistic Societies* is more of a personal response to the phenomenon of utopian and religious communes as described in the book rather than a critical assessment of the book itself.

Nordhoff, as James reports, describes “eight distinct communistic societies... composed of a large number of subdivisions; the Shakers alone having no less than fifty-eight settlements” (561). From this impressive number the reviewer

chooses a few and concentrates mainly on the issues of economy and the relations of the sexes. It is actually the economy which, in James's opinion, remains Nordhoff's main interest: "[h]is purpose... was to investigate communistic life from the point of view of an adversary to trades-unions, and to see whether in the United States... it might not offer a better promise to workingman than mere coalitions to increase wages and shorten the hours of labor" (560). Already, this interest in the fate of the "workingman" is very unlike James, especially when he expresses it so clearly: "[s]uch experiments would be worth examining if they did nothing more for the workingman than change the prospect of him into something better than a simple perpetuity of hire—a prospect at the best depressing and irritating" (560). It is an old story that the working class has little place in his own writings, although—as perhaps with every other possible theme—a devotee of James will provide examples to prove the opposite, the late story "In the Cage" being a case in point. His early story, "Gabrielle de Bergerac" is another good example of a favorable attitude to the lower classes—the hero, a tutor in an aristocratic home, has very humble origins, and still he receives a very respectful treatment from the author. By far, it is *The Princess Casamassima* that features in James's *oeuvre* as the most conspicuous attempt to deal with the problems of the proletariat. Yet, considering the whole of James's fiction, these are just exceptions to the rule.

But in the Nordhoff review, James devotes a lot of space to the discussion of how the experimental communities could have satisfied the working classes' higher aspirations. Unfortunately, his final judgment is that they did not: "beauty of surroundings and breath of intelligence were nowhere striking features of communistic life." Even though most of these communities were based on religion, their spiritual element was often "singularly gross and unlovely" (561). Still, they all enjoyed material prosperity, and the reader who bears in mind the contemporaneous conditions of the working class in Europe is impressed. James is also impressed and, perhaps because he feels respect, too, he develops a rather objective view of the "communists."

One manifestation of this objectivity is the necessity to remember that these people were "common, uneducated, [and] unaspiring" to begin with, and to demand from them a sudden cultivation of the mind would be unfair. James stresses that, as members of the societies, people become "more prosperous and more wealthy." They are ignorant, and their beliefs are "queer, stiff, [and] sterile," yet "the sacrifice of intelligence has not been considerable." Finally, James even allows the Shakers "a sort of angular poetry of their own" (561). There is a certain lack of logic in the above—"ignorance" and the "sterile dogmas" do not agree with what we commonly understand as "intelligence." However, James must equate intelligence with a good sense of practicality and thrift which

these people exemplified, and which he underlines throughout the review. As to calling the Shakers' customs "angular poetry," this is James's attempt at objectivity, meaning, perhaps, that asceticism and romanticism are somehow related and appeal to the imagination. His further comments on the Shakers strongly underscore angularity over poetry of any kind. In the meantime, the wealth and certain easiness of living are matters which give the "unaspiring" societies a great advantage over the living conditions of the working classes elsewhere. The Harmonists, for example, "hold property to the amount of between two and three million dollars" (562); the Zoarists "have achieved comfort... [and] are relieved from severe toil" (563). The Shakers enjoy "great prosperity," and their work is not excessive, either (564). Material comfort is the issue that connects all the societies, and James reports it duly.

Alas, their prosperity is material in the strictest sense. They have enough to eat, they own a lot of land, and their future appears safe: they "have driven the wolf permanently from their doors," as James cites directly from Nordhoff (563). Yet, the pleasures of mind and body are rarely enjoyed by the members of the communes. A pleasure of the mind would be, certainly, the contemplation of beauty. James quotes a Shaker who referred to the idea of beauty as "absurd and abnormal." The same man gives an example of a rich interior he saw, noticing especially the frames of the pictures, which he called "receptacles of dust" (365). James only recounts this; he does not offer a comment. Yet, given his own passion for the art, this dry report is surprising—apparently, the great aesthete has no words to express his horror. That James associated the interest in picture frames with a non-cultivated mind is somewhat perversely shown in his 1872 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books*. This piece, much more than *Hawthorne* seven years later, expresses young James's strong condescension toward the author under review. Hawthorne, according to James, knew little of the fine arts: "The 'most delicate charm' to Mr. Hawthorne was apparently simply the primal freshness and brightness of paint and varnish, and—not to put too fine a point upon it—the new gilding of the frame" (*Literary Criticism* 311). Frames, no matter if dusty or freshly gilded, as James seems to tell us, should never attract a sophisticated person's attention.

Devout, hardworking, and disdainful of trivialities such as the contemplation of art and beauty, the various "communists" cultivate a traditionally Christian virtue "of asceticism, of the capacity for taking a grim satisfaction in dreariness" (563). James's own protagonists practice it but rarely, and quite a few of his American types (as opposed to the "Europeanized" Americans) abstain from bodily pleasures. These characters are often shown without hostility but with a mild condescension, as in the case of Mr. Wentworth from *The Europeans* (1878). Puritan-minded Mr. Wentworth is dignified and even likable despite his old-fashioned ways. Another

typical American, Longmore, the protagonist of “Madame de Mauves” (1874), also comes from the Puritan stock: “He had in his composition a lurking principle of asceticism to whose authority he had ever paid an unquestioning respect.” Yet, upon encountering a situation which requires great sacrifice, Longmore is ascetic no more: “To renounce—to renounce again—to renounce for ever—was this all that youth and longing to resolve were meant for? Was experience to be muffled and mutilated, like an indecent picture?” (*Complete Stories* 882). Longmore’s words could well be applied to James’s attitude toward the idea of life in the communes. These people renounced experience and embraced “a life... of organized and practiced aridity” (*Literary Criticism* 565). However, Longmore’s words could be significant here for more than one reason. The “indecent picture” brings to mind sexuality, the experience that youth “longs for.” This experience together with the aura that surrounds it was truly “muffled” or “mutilated” in communal living.

Not surprisingly, the matters of the body were of extreme importance in the Christian communes. Extreme also were the differences in this respect: from the total renunciation of carnality in the case of the Shakers to the apparently wanton ways of the Oneida Perfectionists. James deems both attitudes as “singularly unlovely and grotesque” (561). He approaches the subject of sexuality with obvious relish, often tinged with humor. One sect, called the Harmonists at Economy or Rappists (from Father Rapp), practiced total celibacy. Nordhoff heard from the older Rappists that the idea came actually from the young members of the community. “One would have been curious to have a little personal observation of these ‘young members’ who were so in love with the idea of single blessedness,” observes James ironically. He then compares the sectarian celibates to Catholic nuns and priests, and states that while the Catholics “find celibacy holy, and salutary to the spirit,” the former ones regard this state as “positively agreeable in itself” (563). At this point, James appears so amused that he turns to outward jesting: “Mr. Nordhoff found in a Shaker Community near Rochester several French Canadians of the Catholic faith, and in another in Ohio several more Catholics, one of whom was a Spaniard and an ex-priest. A French Canadian strikes one as the most amusing imbroglio of qualities conceivable until one encounters a Spanish priest” (563). Perhaps, a French Canadian amuses James just for being one, as the tradition of joking about the northern neighbors has always been strong in the US. Moreover, in the reviews of Parkman’s books about French Canada, James writes about “excessively prolific citizens”—the Catholics who were not bound to celibacy by monastic vows (*Literary Criticism* 579). Apparently, the Canadians multiplied easily, and this might be the actual reason why he finds a French Canadian Shaker a ridiculous idea. James’s remark about the Spanish priest is even more frivolous. Often, in American propaganda after

the annexation of Texas, the Catholic priest was shown as a sinister figure, not at all celibate. A good example is Augusta Evans-Wilson's youthful novel, *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo* (1855), a "melodramatic attack on Catholicism" (Baym 281), where Father Mazzolin's favorite occupation is the seduction of young virgins.

While some sects, for example the Shakers or the Harmonics, held celibacy as their dogma, others, as the Zoarites, "disapprove[d] of marriage, but they permit[ed] it, which seem[ed] rather an oddity. 'Complete virginity,' sa[id] their articles of faith, 'is more commendable than marriage'" (564). Actually, the oddity is not so great if we remember these words from the Bible: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" and "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, 'It is good for them if they abide as I am'"—that is, celibate. There have been various interpretations of St. Paul's words, but it seems unsurprising that these fanatic Christians took them literally, reluctantly allowing "the touch" to escape greater evil: "But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" (*The Holy Bible*, 1st Corinthians 7). James's interpretation is more cynical: abstaining from marriage "is, of course, more economical" (564), family life being obviously an expensive pleasure.

Curiously, James does not devote much space to the group that was most radical in the matters of the body, the Oneida Perfectionists, although he stresses that the part of Nordhoff's book about the Perfectionists is most absorbing. He quotes an Oneida song: "And we have one home / And one family relation," adding only that it has "a delightful naïveté, shadowing forth as it does the fact that these ladies and gentlemen are all indifferently and interchangeably each other's husbands and wives" (566–567). James writes about other intriguing customs of the Oneidans, for example the short hair and trousers for women, mind healing, and the daily meetings in which particular members are "criticized." The Oneida community must have offered not only a fascinating object of study, but it also presented a strong attraction for potential converts, undoubtedly because of this "one family relation": "Propagation is carefully limited, and there are, as may be imagined, many applications for admission." There were many other curiosities of the Perfectionists that James does not mention, although he considers J. H. Noyes "a very skillful and... 'magnetic' leader" (567). For example, in Noyes's community, good looks were encouraged:

John Humphrey Noyes valued youth and lectured his followers that one way to keep young 'was to keep up our attractiveness.' He pointed out that the 'virgin state' had proven to be the most attractive condition for women and recommended that women 'find a way to keep [them]selves in a virgin state all the time.' Dressing like children seems a logical way for women to fulfill both criteria—looking young and virginal. (Fischer 134)

Thus, it was not important to be a virgin but to look like one; perhaps the business of exchanging partners was easier then.

James appears less shocked at the relation of the sexes in the Oneida community than at another practice of theirs, the “criticisms” performed every evening on one of the members. As mentioned before, while discussing the idea of “complex marriages,”³ James uses expressions such as “ladies and gentlemen,” which imply his amusement rather than horror. Yet, he is rather disturbed by the practice of “criticism,” which leads him to believe that the Perfectionists “morally and socially” are “simply hideous.” Describing the “criticism” of a young man named Henry, the reviewer becomes truly appalled: it was “fathomless depths of barbarism.” James makes it clear what angered him most about this practice: “an attempt to organize and glorify the detestable tendency toward the complete effacement of privacy in life and thought everywhere so rampant with us nowadays” (567). Interestingly, in Nordhoff’s book the passage about Henry is nowhere to be found. The young man’s name is Charles, and his fault was a preference for one woman, pregnant with his child, to other females⁴.

Alfred Habegger argues that there is much more to James’s confusion of names than just a simple error. According to the critic, James used the name “Henry” through as a result of an unconscious but a telling slip—confusing the young Oneidan with his own father, Henry James, Sr.:

Now, if we attempt to read this story through Henry Jr.’s eyes, to see what he would have seen in it, we sense a disturbing resemblance between Charles and Henry Sr. as a young man. Although there is a crucial difference, Charles recapitulates Henry Sr.’s great life-crisis. Both loved a single woman. Both were pressured by invasive communists.... But there was this difference: While Charles was tragically persuaded to give up the woman he loved, Henry Sr. had emerged in triumph long ago from the mire of free love and socialism, and he had done so precisely by fathering both a family and a philosophy of marriage. Charles’s ‘error’—loving one woman faithfully—was the virtue that saved Henry Sr. Thus, Oneidan Charles presented a defamiliarized image of the reviewer’s own father. (59)

3 “Complex marriage” is John Humphrey Noyes’s own term, meaning that all men and all women on earth were married to one another, which allowed sexual relations with many partners. James does not use this expression.

4 Nordhoff reports what Noyes said as a conclusion to the “criticism”: “Charles, as you know, is in the situation of one who is by and by to become a father. Under these circumstances, he has fallen under the too common temptation of selfish love, and a desire to wait upon and cultivate an exclusive intimacy with the woman who was to bear a child through him. This is an insidious temptation, very apt to attack people under such circumstances; but it must nevertheless be struggled against.”

The issues reminding the son of his father's life aside, what horrifies James is the public discussion of intimate details, and that such a practice could be masqueraded as beneficial to all: "the sign of 'democratization' became the aggressive 'invasion'... by newspaper editors and reporters" (Habegger 60). Jealously guarding his own private matters, James anticipated the modern intrusions upon the private sphere.

In striving to be unemotional and objective, James appears to agree with Nordhoff as to the presentation of the communes. It would be easy to joke with happy abandon or to fall into heavy irony—the unusual ways of the communistic societies provide lots of pretexts for such reactions. But James, as if dutifully, tries to balance humor and irony with a positive description of almost every society in question. After stating that the Harmonics at Economy, for example, created "a scornfully conservative parody or burlesque," he remembers that "[t]he experiment of Father Rapp, however... has been a solid, palpable success" (562). This economic success, as stated before, was, for James, a matter of great respect. Yet, it is not only the material values that count here; James is able to notice and appreciate the human dignity of these strange people. He writes about one Dr. Keil, the leader of the Aurora society who lost five children "between the ages of eighteen and twenty one." James reports the man's statement of faith and respectfully abstains from comment. However, "James the equilibrist" is present here, as well; before giving the account of Dr. Keil's tragedy, he says: "He had been a man-milliner in his own country, but his present character, in spite of these frivolous antecedents, is a very vigorous and sturdy one" (564). It is as if James could not stop himself from making irreverent comments. As most of his reviews show, he tends to balance positive comments with negative reflections, serious statements with funny images, and so on. Speaking of Dr. Keil and his millinery, we should remember that, in James's fiction, the honest, "true" Americans boast of not-so-dignified jobs: "At one time I sold leather; at one time I manufactured wash-tubs," says the hero of *The American* (Novels 598). In *The Ambassadors*, the product that the Newsome family manufactured is never named; however, it surely is not something grand.

As to the Shakers, James reports on their strange customs with relish. He quotes a passage from Nordhoff, describing a Shaker ceremony, in which the very expressions attract the reader's attention: "two female subjects from Canterbury" were "at length ushered into the sanctuary": "their eyes were closed, and their faces moved in semi-yrations"; there is also some "indubitably obvious... super-human agency" and to top it all, certain "abnormal males... lay in a building at some distance." However, he also praises the Shakers with seriousness. They may have ridiculous, "perverted and grotesque," beliefs, but they "seem to us by far the most perfect and consistent communists" (565). They work hard and their products are of "excellent quality"; they are truly spiritual; there is also "a kind

of wholesome conservatism in [their] philosophy... which we confess takes our fancy.” James underscores their “self-respect” and “sense of the value of discipline” (565–66). All in all, in his section on the Shakers, James uses the derivatives of the word “respect” and appreciative vocabulary in general the most. At the same time, he repeats words like “dreary,” “grim,” “arid,” or “rigid”—the harsh sounds underscoring the ugliness of the subject. Sadly, James does not see the gloomy life in American experimental communes as absolutely alien to the American standards: “one must reflect not only on what people take but on what they leave, and remember that there are in America many domestic circles in which, as compared with the dreariness of private life, the dreariness of Shakerism seems like boisterous gaiety” (565). This truly chilling observation stays in the reader’s mind longer than all the peculiarities of the communes. At the end of his discussion of the Shakers, James returns to the issue of the sinister shadow of Puritanism, lingering in his country: “[t]hat [the Shakers] do not continue to make recruits is perhaps a sign that family life among Americans at large is becoming more entertaining” (566). This time, his attitude is more upbeat.

In the Nordhoff review, James’s humor is not very refined and concentrates on national stereotypes and sexual matters. Thus, the Germans are a target of a humorous presentation. Most of the societies were established by German immigrants; James constantly reminds the reader of such German “characteristics” as baking good bread and keeping their affairs in excellent order, but paying little attention to intellectual exercise. Other nationalities are mentioned, too: “the Icarians, a French society in Iowa; a Swedish settlement, at Bishop Hill, in Illinois; a cluster of seven hopeful Russians (one of them a ‘hygienic doctor’) at Cedar Vale, in Kansas... an experiment in Virginia, embodying as ‘full members’ two women, one man, and three boys” (564). Of the “seven hopeful Russians,” James mentions only the “hygienic doctor,” but the original list of members is longer and no less amusing: “There are here a ‘hygienic doctor’ and a ‘reformed clergyman,’ both Spiritualists, and a Russian sculptor of considerable fame, a Russian astronomer, and a very pretty and devoted and wonderfully industrious Russian woman” (Nordhoff). The Virginia society calls for an additional comment from James: “The three boys have a great responsibility on their shoulders; we hope they are duly sensible of it” (64). Nordhoff also lists “four women and five men as ‘probationary members’” of the community (*Communitic Societies*), but James chooses to omit this information—the arithmetic “responsibility” of the three boy-members sounds funnier without it.

The review of *The Communitic Societies* leaves the reader with a positive feeling—one almost feels James’s gladness. Nordhoff must have done his job well; the reviewer makes no critical remarks about his style or ideas. Actually, James does not mention Nordhoff’s style at all, which in itself might be

a compliment—Nordhoff’s writing does not belong to belles-lettres, and its value is informative rather than aesthetic—thus the lack of any form assessment in the review must imply that the text meets James’s stylistic standards for this kind of literature. If anything, James’s negative personal opinions concern the “societies.” There is a lot in their lifestyle and ideas that James does not approve of; still, the disapproval of some things is balanced by the appreciation of others. James is sorry that for some people art and beauty are not important, he is saddened by the “dreary” aspect of their lives, he laughs at certain ridiculous ideas. At the same time, he notices the dignity and even self-respect of the “communists.” He emphatically points out that the “experiments” are profitable for their members and make their lives easier. He finishes the review by saying that “Mr. Nordhoff’s volume... seems to establish fairly that, under certain conditions and with strictly rational hopes, communism in America may be a paying experiment” (567). His “seems,” “may,” “certain conditions,” and “strictly rational hopes” are the cautious reservations of an upper-class intellectual, speaking of a class that does not really belong to his scope of interest. That James took a brief interest in it could be the Nordhoff’s major achievement.

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