Shooting Rites

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"Shooting Rites." Pacifists would not like the title. After Columbine, the gun metaphor rings violent, especially if the implied subjects in front of the camera are humans. Feminists would likely join the pacifists if the assumed shooter-photographer were leeringly male, and the one upon whom the predatory photographic gaze rested were detectably female. And the post-colonialists would undoubtedly join these other two groups if those shot were objectified, or patronized by either the shooting or the viewing of the shooting.

One would think that a ritual-studies scholar could find a more venerable subject, such as ritual and the sacred, ritual and political power, ritual and racism, or ritual and cognitive psychology. I thought I had cornered a wonderfully obscure topic until someone called my attention to the popular TV series, *Six Feet Under*. Its funerary voyeurism creates a cultural climate in which rites shot are *au courant*.

Rites are eminently photogenic. After tall mountains, bright flowers, and towering skyscrapers, what else attracts as much photographic attention as a wedding replete with flowing costume and energetic dance? Or an initiation stained with blood and climaxed with hugs and tears? Pilgrims and explorers have long lugged home souvenirs testifying to their presence at exotic scenes in foreign places—what better way to package a culture for export than shooting people's ceremonies and celebrations?

Lots of people shoot rites. Tourists shoot them, hoping to import the local color (duty free, of course). Family members shoot rites of passage, pickling collective memories in order to preserve a sense of belonging. Ethnographers shoot rites in order to salvage indigenous practices before they are gobbled up in the maw of globalization. Documentary makers shoot rites to entertain television audiences (and perhaps, accidentally, educate them). Feature-film makers sometimes shoot rites, usually as framing for more dramatic, non-ritualistic actions. Journalists shoot rites too, but only on occasions when they serve as backdrop for local social dramas or global political events. Religious broadcasters shoot worship, song, and other ritual activities in order to make converts of outsiders, extend sacred space into domestic space, and provide a visible product in return for donations. Even worship leaders and liturgy professors occasionally shoot rites as ways of teaching or evaluating liturgical skills.

But what does shooting rites do? What does it do to the rites shot, the people who shoot them, and those who enact them?

*Shooting Documents*

To shoot a rite is to render it an object of study. During my first field research in 1973, I took pictures. For one thing, tourists did that, and a camera helped me blend into the crowd. For another, anthropologists were supposed to record what they observed, and I was a religious-studies scholar being adopted, under Victor Turner's tutelage, into the anthropologists' clan. So I shot the Masses, pageants, and parades of the Santa Fe Fiesta as a form of quick, visual note-taking. The Fiesta was an annual, complex, multi-location event crammed tightly into a few
autumn days. I shot its rites and performances because I did not have time to observe them carefully. Shooting was a kind of shorthand, as well as a substitute for really seeing.

Unlike texts and paintings, pageants and ceremonies do not sit still. They are not quite "there." Like all performing arts, ritual enactments evaporate in the doing. So shooting is a way of making them hold still so one can analyze them—turn them this way and that. Shooting freezes action, helping a scholar notice details after the action dies down.

But my Fiesta slides, the visual documents created when I first began to study ritual, soon gathered dust, only a few of them making their way into a book. In the book the function of those photos was to testify that I had been there, taken it all down, and completed the anthropological rite of passage called fieldwork. The photos, ensconced in Symbol and Conquest, a proper book, were sucked into the service of what was considered real, which is to say textual scholarship. The pictures, never really valued in themselves, were put to work procuring tenure. So, in the end they were worth the investment in camera and film, although I never really studied those slides as people would today if they were serious about visual anthropology and material culture.

**Shooting Reveals**

In the early 1990s, almost twenty years after I studied ritual and drama in the Santa Fe Fiesta, a film maker named Jenny DeBouzek went to New Mexico to make a video based on Symbol and Conquest. Her video, Gathering up Again: Fiesta in Santa Fe, captures a crucial behind-the-scenes event. The story it tells is this:

Randy, a Pueblo Indian, lives in Los Angeles. One summer he returns to New Mexico, and one of his Hispanic friends invites him to play Chief Domingo in a traditional pageant that celebrates...well, that is the question. If one believes local Pueblo people, it celebrates the conquest of Indians by Spanish conquistadors; if one believes certain bishops and clergy in Santa Fe, it celebrates the conquest of war itself by men of good will, regardless of race, color, or creed.

Since Randy now lives in California rather than in one of the New Mexico pueblos, he does not realize that most Pueblo people have been quietly boycotting the Fiesta pageant, that no Indian has played Chief Domingo for several decades.

It is the day of the Entrada pageant, the ideological heart of the Fiesta, and, it seems, there has not been a full dress rehearsal. Randy arrives, greets his buddies, sees their ragtag, stereotypical "Indian" costumes, puts up with their mock threats about making "Indian" jokes, and prepares to perform. Then we watch as the meaning of the play and his part in it begins to dawn on him. He is humiliated and embarrassed. The camera notices him onstage crying. At one point it seems that an organizer actually has to push him onstage to finish playing his demeaning part. Interviewed after the pageant, Randy admits that if he had known what was going on, he probably would not have participated at all.

Gathering up Again threatened the local sensibility in a way that Symbol and Conquest, a mere book, could not. The video did not merely refer to religious and inter-ethnic difficulties, it re-enacted them, making them present. The video had the capability of renewing the event over and over again. Before our very eyes we watch Randy awaken, his Spanish and Indian cohorts
feel shame, and the pageant begin to unravel. The real drama is not onstage but backstage. We not only witness Randy's humiliation but also hear an utterance that one does not hear in Santa Fe: "I was ashamed of being Spanish."

When the state school board began to consider distributing the video to public schools, there was an enormous political outcry in Santa Fe, so much so that the director felt she had to move to another city.

Shot rites, by revealing backstage activity, can threaten or transform them, with the result that ethical and political debates are inevitable.

**Shooting Validates**

Shooting a rite can amount to a declaration: "This event is really important; this is real." Think about weddings. Video documentation and portrait shooting not only disrupt them but also validate them. Norma Joseph, a friend, and a religious studies scholar at Concordia University, once described a scene from a Jewish wedding in Detroit. The videographer was shooting the photographer shooting the wedding party, all of whom were carrying throw-away cameras which had been handed out so everyone could help capture the fleeting, "precious moments." The reflexivity, she observed, was three layers deep.

"Capturing" sounds less violent than "shooting." The dancing, marrying human animals in Detroit were not quite shot like game. Shots fired by a videographer are not like bullets that kill, but like tranquilizer darts. They are for our own good, right?

Most rites of passage require witnesses. A fleshy, merely human pair of eyes is a fallible witness, but the eye, amplified through a lens and dramatically followed up by a distinctive click or a telling whir, creates "evidence"; it makes "memories." The act of shooting renders the one who holds the machine godlike, a manufacturer of eternity. Documenting a performance is no longer an act imposed on a rite by an outsider. Rather, it is part of the ceremony itself.

Like Kabuki theater performances, the scenarios of contemporary Japanese weddings are laced with dramatic pauses built into processions so that viewers, including those with cameras, can take in the costumes and postures, the whole scene, without being distracted by the mere busyness of bodily movement. To the Japanese eye the stilled photographic moment is more sacred than the moving cinematic one. The Japanese wedding performance is constructed to facilitate the shooting, and the shooting validates the ritual act.³

Of course, it is not only in Japan that photos and videos have come to possess the validating power usually ascribed to marriage licenses and tombstones. Because shooting itself can become ritualized, the co-opting of scholarly visual materials is always a danger.

**Shooting Publicizes**

Did you watch Princess Diana's funeral? The day of Diana's funeral I was in the Bay, a Montreal department store. There, for all the word to see, was a bag lady surrounded by a circle of big-screen TVs. She was weeping shamelessly.

Not to have shot the ceremony would have deprived royalty of an opportunity to be publicly contemplated; not to have shot the ceremony would have deprived the world of a moment of
togetherness. Not to have shot and then disseminated Diana's funeral would have been to cheat that lady and the rest of us of a chance to grieve, and, yes, to gawk. Without the shooting, the funeral rite would have lost most of its public accessibility. Without the shooting we fathers would have lost an opportunity to discuss dying princesses with our daughters.

A Ghanaian graduate student conducting field research on his countrymen's funeral rites in Toronto discovered that they were regularly shot, and that the videos were shipped back to Ghana. Why? Because tradition requires inheritors to participate in funerals, and video participation is one way of discharging that duty across an ocean.

Like Kodak, Microsoft now capitalizes on the fact that even in ritually inept cultures rites of passage must be shared. The "share this folder on the network" command now provided by Windows XP enables you to discharge your kinship duties. No sooner do we return from a wedding or funeral, having shot it on a digital camera, than we can share the entire folder with all the distant relatives, and even the entire web-watching world, if we are so inclined. Why? Because shooting validates.

Shooting Mystifies

A shooter looks through a viewfinder, screen, or lens, and by doing so focuses on some things while cutting others out. The power to define which things are out of bounds and which things are central is an enormous, mystifying power.

Since I work more often with artists than with advertisers or scientists, most of the photographers of my acquaintance regard their instruments as aids for contemplation. When they walk the streets or hunt the woods with the intention of shooting, they slow down, attending to the details of things. They contemplate what most of us hurry past. For them, shooting is an act of selection, and selectivity helps them attend to what appears—to attend fully, as one does in meditation practice.

But selectivity and focus cut both ways. They also blind the beholder. Shooting hides countervailing activities and disguises blemishes. With digital editing one can now disguise and manipulate right down to the pixel level. Consequently most of us are unable to tell which things were "really there" and which things are edited in, or out.

Rites, like photos, enable participants to contemplate what is really real, to encounter mystery, but they also mystify. Rites, like photos and film, cloud the sources of authority, shielding them from criticism. Ritualizing, like shooting, is one of the primary ways of constituting authority. Those with ritual and photographic know-how have more authority; those lacking such knowledge have less.

Authority is not only constructed in ritual and by means of ritual but also about ritual. In A&E's Ancient Mysteries series on television there was an installment called "Sacred Rites and Rituals." Leonard Nimoy, the narrator, exudes the cool Vulcan rationality that he embodied as Spock on Star Trek. He frames rites as examples of exotic violence. In addition, the ritualists have no names. These rites, the script has him say, "challenge logic." Ritualists' actions are made weird by the process of cinematic decontextualization.

As a person interviewed in the series, with the albatross of attributed expertise around my neck,
I was sucked into the vortex along with Nimoy. I was shot into complicity with the script's interpretive strategy, even though I would have dissented vigorously from much that Nimoy said. For the last decade I have been involved, as on-screen "expert" and behind-the-scenes advisor, in the production of films and plays dealing with ritual. My protests notwithstanding, I am presented in television documentaries as knowing everything about rites, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western.

Behind the scenes, my job, as two producers put it, is to keep them honest. Often when I see the results I think I have failed my task. The "honor" of becoming an authority for documentary television is itself a kind of ritual dismemberment. Hours of interview, and pages of notes, research, and advice, are sliced paper thin, becoming salami for fast-food visual consumption, and are then used to warrant producers' and advertisers' values. Producers may listen dutifully, even enthusiastically, but when the interviewing and editing start, almost all the advice is ignored. In the end, the genre—television documentary—falling prey to the prevailing cultural images of ritual, determines the outcome, the presentation that the public watches. The genre and the cultural prejudices exert canonical force.

Almost none of this made-for-TV shooting leaves me proud of the final product. So, inevitably, I follow up the supposedly creative film-making task with a critical, scholarly one. An airing usually necessitates an article—just to protect myself, if nothing else. Being shot into the stratosphere of expertise, one is forced to ask questions that neither theology nor ethnography prepares one to ask: As public intellectuals, are we responsible for the pap that airs in our names? Are we morally obliged to traffic with TV image-makers? Should we not lock ourselves instead into ivory towers and write responsible books?

**Shooting Constructs**

*The Harlem Book of the Dead* is a beautiful, disturbing volume. From the 1920s through the 1960s the funerary photographer James Van Der Zee shot the Harlem dead. Photographing them was both a sign of respect and a way of engendering hope. When it became technologically possible to superimpose images of Jesus on a coffin lid, or a band of angels above a corpse, for the bereaved found it easier to embrace the evangelical opportunities lurking around death.

The one photo from the *Harlem Book of the Dead* that stops me in my tracks is of a mother, a father (smiling, no less), and a child sitting for a family photo. Nothing unusual is going on, except that . . . the child is dead.

Toni Morrison says of Van Der Zee's photos, and of this tradition of mortuary photography, "How living are his portraits of the dead." The right photograph not only memorialized the deceased, created an ancestor, and preached a sermon, but it also painted an icon, an aperitif of the resurrection. Shooting was a way of constructing sanctity.

Of course, only a little reflection is necessary to recognize that the eternity afforded by shooting devices is a little less enduring than that promised Muslim and Christian faithful. Photos, after all, fade. Even CDs and DVDs, across time, deteriorate. The "never" in the claim, "The image and sound quality of DVD never decline with age," is like the "never" in "I'll never get pregnant," or "We will never attack another country first." It is a pious aspiration, not a fact.
When my children were younger I would interview them on video, hoping to discover what was behaviorally sacred to them. I would ask, "If the house were on fire and you had time to grab only one thing before running out, what would it be?" One afternoon they turned the tables, asking me what I would snatch. I heard myself answer, "The video tapes of your birthdays, holidays, trips, and these interviews." The kids are older and interviews are harder to extract now, but the family watches these videos over and over again. Ritually, each new round of sibling wrangling, each little bit of kid metaphysics, is met with hoots, laughter, and "Here it comes, the part where . . . " One does not have to be a ritual-studies scholar to understand why the family Bible or the collection of crucifixes would be left to burn while the family photos would not. Even flawed family shooting rites produce icons, constructions that embody the ultimacies to which they point.

**Shooting Dramatizes**

The anthropologist Victor Turner taught a generation of anthropologists that ritual is nothing if not dramatic. He made this claim not as an observation of a fact but as a matter of definition and theory. Many scholars continue to echo his assumption. I no longer share it. Although ritual and drama may be first cousins, and rites are photogenic, we are not well served by the assumption that rites are *necessarily* dramatic. Many rites are sedentary, repetitive, and boring—marked by a rhythm quite unlike the climactic actions that the Euroamerican West expects of drama. Try to make a film of a rite and you will often discover how undramatic ritual can be.

But never mind. By shooting it, one can make it dramatic. If the drama is not there in the actions of participants committing acts liturgical, you can, if you are adept with cinematic tools, put some drama there. You know—the way Ken Burns makes moving documentaries about the Civil War, baseball, jazz, and New York City, by constantly panning across or zooming into manuscripts and relics. Never mind that the historic actors are dead, or that the objects were never living—the camera and narrator are alive. By their shooting and zooming and talking they can dramatize the inert into the lively and engaging.

Of all the shooters of ritual, Leni Riefenstahl, unfortunately, was one of the most talented. She died recently in her nineties. Utilizing thirty cameras and one-hundred-twenty assistants, and pioneering documentary innovations that are remarkable even today, Riefenstahl, in *Triumph of the Will*, dramatized the 1934 Nuremberg Party Congress into a national coming-out ceremony. Then in 1938, in the *Olympiad*, she transformed the 1936 Olympics into Greco-Germanic religion. *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad* are masterpieces, studied not only by that rare obscurantist bird, the shooting-ritual scholar, but by documentary makers everywhere. The loop of ritualizing and dramatizing is so effective that each genre of action feeds the other. Consequently, the films continue to exert canonical force on their viewers, even those who dissent from Riefenstahl's ethics and politics.

**Shooting Violates**

Tourist photos seem innocent enough until you are pulled up short, instructed by indignant locals that not all rites are fair game. Shooting a rite can disrupt it, or, if sustained, even transform it. Shooting rites causes trouble in situations where rites are held holy and cameras profane. You can understand the consternation of the locals. If your grandmother's funeral were disrupted by a bunch of handycam-carrying strangers, the expanding and contracting phallic
lenses of their electronic gadgets trained upon your grieving uncle, profanation would seem to be the only possible outcome. Even scholars, dedicated to analysis, would protest the photographic rape of a memorial service.

Feminist scholars have launched the most thorough critiques of "the gaze" with its voyeuristic, objectivizing, violating possibilities. On some occasions, shooting amounts to what in the Spanish Southwest was called a "rite of reduction," an enactment formally imposing a hierarchy of clearly demarcated subordinate and superordinate positions.

Like women, indigenous people have become wary of the camera, since it has too often served as an instrument not only of sexism but also of racist colonialism. Late nineteenth century photographic projects like those of Edward R. Curtis not only rendered Indians iconic, but also functioned as a form of trophy-taking, the white man's peculiar form of head-hunting. Shooting was a means of packaging the booty of conquest so it could be traded back East (you know, in New Haven and Cambridge). As a consequence of photographic and cinematic intrusion, many native groups now consider shooting an intercultural rip-off, so they forbid it during their ceremonies, or else make camera-toting white folks pay dearly for the privilege.

**Shooting (Dis)embodies**

What shooting seizes upon is bodilyness, and if ritual studies is about anything, it is about embodiment in social contexts. The study of ritual is not primarily the study of ideas in people's heads or feelings in their hearts; it is about meanings embodied in posturing and gesturing. Video, or film, is a methodological key to studying postures and gestures. Shooting the surfaces of things, bodies included, has analytical and not merely expressive or entertainment value. I will not labor the point since I have made it so repeatedly in the past.

Another side to photography's peculiar way of embodying exists. A while back my wife and I were studying Spanish, and boarding in a local home in Salamanca, Spain. One afternoon we noticed on the mantle several pictures of people, their mouths wide open. Something—we did not know what—was being deposited on their tongues. Later, when we inquired, we were instructed in a mixture of Spanish and English, "Pan," they said, then, "sagrada, sagrada . . . " They were trying to teach us the language we'd come to learn. Eventually, we pieced the meaning together. They were talking about bread, holy bread. Communicants had been photographically frozen in the act of consuming a communion wafer. Like a bloody sheet at a Moroccan wedding, the framed photo was proof that the definitive act had been truly committed. Friends and relatives relished such photos. We saw them everywhere, so Spanish clergy had to have been complicit with the practice.

Such scenes give one pause. Many of the reigning theories of ritual, religion, and liturgy ill equip us to deal with such practices. The first impulse of many who study religious rites is to object to shooting rites; doing so is either in bad taste or a violation of sanctity. If we ask ourselves what reputable liturgical theologians might say about the act of shooting a host as it greets the tongue, the answer is not difficult to imagine. What could be less dignified, or more crassly literalistic, than bared teeth and salivating tongues? The Spanish photos could be used in seminary liturgy courses as illustrations of the evils of popular religion and photographic imperialism. Why? Because shooting disembodies in the very moment that it creates a tactile or visual surface that the senses can grasp.
**Shooting Complicates**

The shooting mind can be a deeply contemplative one, but the shooting consciousness—that of the photojournalist, the film editor, the theater director, the camera operator—can also be a profoundly suspended, if not disbelieving, one.

Theologians and liturgists sometimes complain that the detachment attendant to the act of shooting is a prophylactic to faith. Several years ago I was shooting the Toronto Towneley Cycle of mystery plays. It was raining, and most of the audience, not up to the ordeal of redemptive suffering, had gone home for supper. A bedraggled, college-age Jesus was lugging a cross down the *via crucis*, which is to say, across the quadrangle of Victoria College. A few dogged photojournalists were still weathering the scene, so cameras were trained on the bedraggled savior. A photographer in a yellow poncho boldly approached the dripping Jesus on his way to Golgotha, which is to say, toward Bloor Street. The photographer drew surprisingly close to Jesus’ face. A few non-journalists gasped. The shooter snapped a shot. Then, suddenly, he fell to one knee and began to weep as he clapped his hand over his mouth. At that moment I, having stepped back rather than in, shot him.

What is one to conclude from the photojournalist’s actions? Certainly not that shooting obviates the possibility of faith. And certainly not that being deeply moved requires one to believe. Just as Huichol shamans can swallow hundreds of peyote buttons and still organize pilgrimages and know where baskets and bows should be placed, so one can simultaneously shoot and revere. Just as Hopi children learn to hold simultaneously the knowledge that kachinas are spirits as well as their relatives dressed up in masks and costumes, so one can ritualize in a fictive, or even ironic, mode. Clearly it is possible, simultaneously, to shoot and to revere, to embrace fictionality and to have faith. The only caveat is that you have to practice.

The social complexity of a feature film can be staggering. *Titanic*, for example, lists fourteen hundred names in its credits; the number of hands stirring the batter was enormous. Socially, cinema is the most complex of contemporary artistic acts. If for no other reason than this social complexity, cinematic art remains largely intractable to the few religious-studies scholars and theologians who try to analyze it. What I enjoy about field research and visual documentation is how they challenge assumptions about ritual and demand more nuanced theories of it.

Conceptually, the relationship between shooting and rites is not as simple as it may seem. We cannot, for example, merely equate the profane with what a culture shoots, or the sacred with what it will not shoot. Nor can we unequivocally claim, for instance, that shooting desecrates funerals but sanctifies weddings. The conceptual conundrum faced by students of ritual is not merely the result of machines, of digital cameras and such, but also of faulty theorizing. With only one or two exceptions, theories of ritual have not attended very fully to the seam between the subjunctive and the declarative, between fictive and ordinary reality. Too easily we have accepted a polarized cluster: on the one hand, we clump ritual with the sacred, believing, and not-acting; on the other, we cluster the profane, performance, acting, and shooting. But the fence that generates this easy methodological dualism is, in practice, breached coming and going, from both directions. Since both insiders and outsiders now have cameras, since ethnographic outsiders now participate, and since participating insiders quickly learn how to observe, the conceptual Berlin wall between ritualizing and dramatizing, two utterly constitutive kinds of human interaction, is crumbling.16
Even in contemporary Christianity, where the relationship between ritual and theater is fairly non-integral, the boundaries can bleed. The film *The Apostle* has two important behind-the-scenes out-takes. In both of them we see how the insider/outsider, actor/non-actor boundary is breached. Not only are real preachers and a real congregation involved, but an actor and a technician, both members of the director Robert Duvall’s crew, are caught undergoing conversion experiences during the making of the film. Duvall not only has to direct and act the part of Sonny, who is leaving his fictive congregation; he also has to negotiate with church members to keep the real congregation from dividing over the issue of being shot by "Hollywood." They worry that "Hollywood" will reduce them to caricatures. Meanwhile, real pastors must not only preach and court the spirit, they must perform their preaching and spirit-courting for the cameras. So everyone, it seems, is crossing and re-crossing the seam between fictionality and ultimacy. Whereas Duvall, the director-actor, has to perform toward believing, the evangelists believe toward performing. In the last analysis perhaps the difference makes less difference than our theoretical postures would have led us to believe.

**Whither?**

I have now created a conceptual tangle. I have uttered a mouthful. However, one could write it as a single sentence: Shooting documents, reveals, validates, publicizes, mystifies, constructs, dramatizes, violates, (dis)embodies, and complicates. The sentence is probably a little dizzying, and this romp through shooting contexts may be too much like a roller coaster ride. But conducting field research and working among performing and media artists is like that, so if you feel disoriented, you have done a good job of stepping inside the zone that I sometimes inhabit as a field researcher and consultant. As if rites, by themselves, were not confounding enough, I have multiplied the complexity by considering rites as objects and contexts of photographic and cinematic activity. But to what end? With what implications?

I conclude with suggestions and provocations—the beginning, not the conclusion, of a conversation or debate:

1. Shooting, and all that it has come to represent here, is not going away. Not only religious rites, but virtually everything on the planet, has, or will have, a recording device pointed at it, for good and for ill.

2. As scholars and teachers we should learn to think and act not only in or with media and art but also between the media and among the arts.

3. This between-space is infested with a thick knot of issues not neatly separable into ethics and aesthetics, economics and religion, or any of the other neat polarizations that usually give us comfort.

4. Because a neatly sectored model of culture is no longer viable, neither are curriculum models that over-value departmentalization.

5. Because shooting now regularly appears on both sides of the line that once separated practitioners and researchers, the models for research must necessarily be collaborative and interdisciplinary.

6. The false split between those who perform or participate, on the one hand,
and those who think or theorize, on the other, is a major deterrent to good scholarship.

7. So let it be said: Scholars, rise up and seize the means of production. Forget television and shoot for the classroom. Learn to shoot and edit as you once, in the far-distant past, learned to use word-processors. As Martin Luther surely ought to have said, "Shoot bravely."

ENDNOTES


4. Reported by Paul Adjin-Tetty.


7. In the foreword of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.


15. Since this lecture is named in his honor, one might, for example, try to imagine Aidan Kavanagh's response to such photos. See his *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo, 1982).


RECOMMENDED READING


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