

Transgressing the witness at three sites of knowledge

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This article examines a performance event, *Life is Perfect*, by Paul+a (Paul Jeff and Sarah Dowling), which took place on 2 October 2004 over a period of 24 hours at The Peterstone Court Hotel in mid-Wales. The site of this work was then revisited by TRAWS (The Inter-University research group for Performance in Wales) as part of an exploration of performance sites across Wales. These findings were themselves then represented at the Centre for Performance Research's conference *Towards Tomorrow?* as both a record of research conducted and as an exploration of the potential of collaborative engagement with site-specific work and its documentation as event within the context of academic research.

The article traces the performance across three sites: hotel, hotel revisited, conference, and questions the knowledge developed at each site, how it challenges the original work, betrays, misrepresents, obscures and ultimately entirely restages it, according to very different criteria than may have originally been intended. Using Maurice Blanchot's fiction 'The instant of my death' and Jacques Derrida's essay '*Demeure*' (both conceptual influences on *Life is Perfect*) the paper turns towards a consideration of the 'death' of performance events and the nature of 'survival' that place offers in opposition to the archive. Finally, it considers the potential new epistemologies that emerge from research exercises focused on the recovery of a relation to knowledge that is not based on evidence, testimony and truth, but rather admits that loss, forgetfulness and uncertainty are integral to any 'return' to the site of performance.

Introduction

This article examines a performance event, *Life is Perfect*, by Paul+a (Paul Jeff and Sarah Dowling), which took place on 2 October 2004 over a period of 24 hours at The Peterstone Court Hotel in mid-Wales. The performance was an enactment of 50 murders, taken in random order from 50 legends, which were captured on a 5 × 4 plate camera using Polaroid-type 55 film with no audience present. The site of this work was then revisited on the weekend of 22–23 January 2005 by TRAWS (The Inter-University research group for Performance in Wales)¹ as part of an exploration of performance sites across Wales, the intention being to gather information on the remains of performance and its transformation in memory and endurance as archive. These findings were themselves then represented at the Centre for Performance

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Research's conference *Towards Tomorrow?*, 6–10 April 2005 as both a record of research conducted but also as an exploration of the potential of collaborative engagement with site-specific work and its documentation as event within the context of academic research. The particular methodology enabled by the TRAWS group attempted to open up the communication, and development, of performance research through collaboration between academics at a number of Welsh universities but also between practitioners and theorists in higher education. In the often isolated confines of academia, where much is talked of 'collaboration', there are few genuinely participatory events in terms of research, without a rigidly prescriptive agenda: conferences are frequently the delivery of individual papers recording the findings of isolated research, research performances often the demonstration of techniques developed through individual practice. So this research enabled a different form of knowledge to surface, through the process of revisiting, memory and debate, but also through a secondary instance of performance itself: the TRAWS research weekend, where site and place were as equally questioned as the very process of research, its methods, and results.

This work traces the performance across the three sites—hotel, hotel revisited and conference—questioning the knowledge developed at each site, how it challenges the original work, betrays, misrepresents, obscures and ultimately entirely restages it, according to very different criteria than may have originally been intended. I argue that such a transgression of the performance event, its re(s/c)itation as research knowledge, is already inscribed in the gap between event and witness (again a three-fold group: camera/TRAWS/conference audience). In the original gap between the event of represented death (already double) and the photographic record, Jeff himself describes an 'eternal return' or obligation to an 'infinite moment' where representation 'collapses in on itself'. Is it possible to bear witness to the event in these terms? The role of witnessing performance is itself compromised by its reliance on supplemental knowledge which relocates, and reinterprets, both site and event. Using Maurice Blanchot's fiction 'The instant of my death' and Jacques Derrida's essay '*Demeure*' (both conceptual influences on *Life is Perfect*), the essay turns towards a consideration of the 'death' of performance events and the nature of 'survival' that place offers in opposition to the archive. Finally the potential new epistemologies that emerge from research exercises are considered, focusing on the recovery of a relation to knowledge that is not based on evidence, testimony and truth but rather admits that loss, forgetfulness and uncertainty are integral to any 'return' to the site of performance.

Due to the nature of *Life is Perfect*—its privacy, the lack of audience, the only witness a camera—it will be useful to consider these three sites of knowledge in a slightly mixed order: the order in which I encountered the work, starting with the TRAWS revisit, followed by the actual event itself and then the representation of both at the *Towards Tomorrow?* conference. These first three sections here are designed to set the scene of my enquiry into the sites of knowledge that *Life is Perfect* has engendered, and form an explanatory base for that exploration in the second section of the essay.

Part I: three sites of knowledge

Site two: Peterstone Court Hotel, January 2005

The TRAWS research weekend was a return to performance sites across a broad range of times (many having occurred years previously) and the nature of each site varied radically from the urban to the rural (although there did seem to be a proliferation of churches and graveyards). It is not the task of this essay to provide a record of all the sites visited, but rather to focus on one event that day, which took place in the late afternoon on Saturday 22 January at the Peterstone Court Hotel. Paul Jeff led this session and took us to the nearby church where we were shown the photographic equipment used and huddled together listening to Paul speak beneath a large tree that sheltered us from the rain. I do not recall much of Paul's speech from the church. I remember being rather overtaken by the place. The graves that were closest to us seemed to be alive with colour and I trailed away from the group photographing the flowers that were on them. Many were cut bunches, yet most were actually plastic: designed to provide a more permanent memorial to the dead.

I was reminded of the decadent fascination with the artificial and the entire gathering took on an unreal aspect: the quality of a staged event, as though a strong gust of wind might reveal the church itself to be constructed of poorly bolted flats that might collapse at any moment. In a sense this presentiment of the theatrical would be entirely fitting for our return to the hotel where Paul would explain more of the performance which had occurred there in October of 2004.

Inside the hotel Paul Jeff described the event, as we enjoyed tea from large pots and smothered scones thickly with cream and jam. Again this mad tea party took on a surreal air as Paul explained the performance event we had been brought there to learn about. As a brief explanation of the event it is perhaps best to use Paul's own words which are taken from the explanatory statement that accompanies the work; this was the essence of Paul's explanation to us in January 2005:

The *Life is Perfect* project is a work of 'performed photography', which is a hybrid form between photography and live art. Here the emphasis for the viewer is on photography as a time based action where the photographs are not merely a record of an event, but the performative act and the record are collapsed into a single utterance and are indistinguishable as separate parts of the work. The implication of this is that the work is durational, and in this case although the work was two years in the preparation it was carried out in just twenty-four hours.

At 2 pm on 2 October 2004 Paul Jeff and Sarah Dowling (Paul+a) booked into a country hotel in mid-Wales and took a room for twenty-four hours. Armed with costumes, props, a 5 × 4 camera with flash and fifty written legends equating to theatrical stage directions detailing short performances, the pair proceeded to perform and record photographically fifty love scenes all ending in murder. Fifty passionate murders equally shared out in terms of gender (including two suicide pacts) and recorded at the instant of death on Polaroid type 55 film. Just over two murders an hour

for twenty-four hours. These are performances carried out with no audience in a hotel bedroom with only the camera as witness. (Jeff, 2004)

We considered the nature of such a performance, discussing both its demands in terms of staging and the inevitable conflicts that arose during the course of its performance; most obviously with other guests. The issues of the remains of the performance and its photographic record raised the most questions, for this was the heart of our consideration during the research exercise. *Life is Perfect* situated itself as an impossible event, as Paul had already implied in his introduction to us, because it was private yet had an alternate presence as performance. The performed event was recorded photographically and this record was already the only intended means of encountering the performance, generating a level of self-reference within the already self-referential medium of the photograph. The archive of the performance was the performance. However Paul did not show us the photographs then, or even the room, or the costumes, the props etc. *Life is Perfect* was a rumour, we needed some evidence.

Having concluded his presentation and our discussion, Paul led us through individually to the dining room where we held a laptop with a single image from *Life is Perfect*. Our own private moment as witness was then photographed.

Site one: Peterstone Court Hotel, October 2004

During the month following the performance we gathered various reactions to each of the sites we had visited, each member of TRAWS had been allocated various tasks at each of these sites: factual annotation, filming, poetic reflection, and most interestingly two roles which accompanied each other: that of an 'expert' witness and one who was not present, remaining in the minibus, who would receive the report of the 'expert' later.

I was most intrigued to see more of the *Life is Perfect* material and was already considering how to develop a response to the piece ready for the presentation at the *Towards Tomorrow?* conference. I asked Paul to send me ten photographs from the piece around which I could develop a better understanding. Alongside these he also sent his treatment of the work, which is planned to appear as a book. For the moment it is best that the few photographs here speak for themselves: furtively, strangely erotic, private and threatening. A photograph of the performers in the room is followed by three photographs of the murders themselves, each captioned by the legend that accompanies them.

Site three: Towards Tomorrow? conference, Aberystwyth April 2005

TRAWS ran a session at the *Towards Tomorrow?* conference in Aberystwyth. This was a presentation of the areas of enquiry that TRAWS engaged with and outlined the



Figure 1. *Life is Perfect*. Copyright Paul Jeff (Paul+a), 2004



Figure 2. 'Man and woman in a hotel room, the man is laid on his back in the bed with pyjama bottoms on. The woman is laid on top of him in the pyjama top. He has a pillow over his face and the woman has her head on the pillow as if to go to sleep. She smiles a satisfied smile and we notice a knife in her hand and a bloody puncture in the man's side.' (Paul+a, 2004)



Figure 3. 'Man and a woman in a hotel room, they are taking a shower and are both covered in soap. As the man turns away from her the woman grabs the shower head and hits him hard over the head. Quickly she loops the hose around his neck and pulls hard dropping to her knees, using all her strength and weight to strangle him. He, with his back arched holds on vainly to the wall fixing.' (Paul + a, 2004)



Figure 4. 'Man and woman in a hotel room, they sit opposite each other on straight backed chairs, both are naked and holding scalpels to each other's throats. They have made a bizarre suicide pact and from the evidence around them the sequence of events is readable. They have each drunk seven glasses of champagne, they have each cut the other's clothes off with seven cuts of the knife and have made neat piles. They have each made six cuts so far to the other's body.' (Paul + a, 2004)

nature of the research trip in January and also emphasised the interdisciplinary nature of the work and its cross-university context. The presentation also included audio-visual documentation of the January trip. The second half of the session enabled the conference delegates to ask individuals from TRAWS about the work and engage with other elements placed around the room. This included an audio tape produced by Jill Greenhalgh, in reaction to *Life is Perfect*, and also a small interactive area I had produced in response to it.

This interactive installation was entitled 'In an Instant: Death, Confidence, Evidence, Testimony and Truth. Some Reflections on *Life is Perfect*' and included two tapes and three brown envelopes. The first tape was a recording of Maurice Blanchot's 'The instant of my death', the second tape had quotations from Paul Jeff's treatment of *Life is Perfect* and Jacques Derrida's essay 'Demeure: fiction and testimony' written about Blanchot's fiction. The envelopes, labelled 'Witness 1' and 'Witness 2' contained, respectively, ten photographs from *Life is Perfect* and a series of photographs taken at the TRAWS event in January 2005, including the photographs Paul had taken of TRAWS members witnessing the photographs on the laptop. Those engaging with the installation were provided with a moment of privacy to view and listen. It created another level of secret interaction that would be unrecoverable, never known, elusive; a moment that generated another site of meaning for the work and for its dissemination in the context of an academic environment.

Part II: transgressing the witness

The witness: transgressed and transformed

A witness should have been present at the scene. A witness should also be present to provide testimony. These are somewhat essential elements to the role of a witness, both entailing being present. What is the status of an absent witness, or one who arrived just too late? The question, taken in the context of *Life is Perfect*, opens again the nature of the photographic, its record of reality and the photographic reconstruction of an event. In viewing the photographic record offered by *Life is Perfect*, as you have just done partially, is there another understanding generated by the very specific staging of death, coloured by eroticism, and is the very nature of site and place reconfigured to generate a peripatetic spectacle enacted once but perpetually re-enacted for the gaze of the new witness? Jeff's own reflective comments on the piece offer some answer here:

The performative act and the intensity of the time based durational nature of the work, means that the photographs have an emotional investment which creates an ambiguous relationship to the removed and dispassionate nature of the record. They also have an immediacy that is usually lacking in photographic 'constructed realities' because the investment in the enactments by the artists is perceived as experiential rather than representational. These are not tableaux vivants but in a real sense they are stilled lives—'Nature Morte'. The act of murder is incessant and the voyeurism is distilled so that every part of the experience is heightened; from the performance/enactment to the



Figure 5. Dan Watt viewing a *Life is Perfect* photograph. Copyright Paul Jeff, 2005

interrogation of the visual data as witnessed from a subjective viewing position. Perspective is diminished through repetition and with it the possibilities of linear narrative—the viewer too finds themselves trapped within the cycle of representation. (Jeff, 2004)

This ‘trapping’ of the viewer is a crucial moment in the elaboration of the double paradox of *Life is Perfect*—I say double because the photograph, as Barthes makes clear (and as we shall return to later) is already an emblem of death. The quotation above opens with consideration of the ‘performative act’ as: immediacy, emotional investment, incessant, voyeurism. But the crucial point here is the diminished nature of perspective through repetition. The staging of death offers an opportunity to side-step the moment, to create a dramatic interstice that avoids death through the staged event (even mocking death—turning it into some circus trick, like a sideshow burial),² but also confirms the power of death through the medium of the photographic. We, solitary viewers, are made complicit in both the act (a murder that has not taken place) and the testimonial (to an event that did not take place). That place in which the (non-)event occurred—allegedly The Peterstone Court Hotel—is no longer the site of the performance. The witness has become the site of staging, because even the photographic record denies itself as real. In every

photograph the shutter cable is clearly visible leading to the hand of the murderer: compelling evidence that these events did not take place.

Jeff offers some thought on the status of the witness, the event and the camera, and finally the nature of the photographic artefact:

As Performed Photography the photographs are not merely a record of the live art action, but the performative act and the record are collapsed into a single utterance and are indistinguishable as separate parts of the work. The photograph should not be seen as a record of an event nor is the performative act privileged as an event worthy of record. The event itself is further complicated as a spectacle because there is neither audience nor witness (save for the camera) and is therefore barely visible. The photographs are purposely left dirty and distressed, they appear like artefacts, in a way which signals the mark of time on a document. Just as the image and the record are collapsed into a single moment, that moment immediately disappears into history and bears the ravages of time. (Jeff, 2004)

Importantly here the photographs stand to mark both the particular time of their creation (with all the imperfections that may remain) but also *that* time stands for *all* times because of this collapse back into history. What *Life is Perfect* offers in terms of the specificity of this event in time it immediately withdraws in terms of repetitious sequence, this collapsing itself into the past repeatedly until the very serialisation of death becomes less an issue of a distressed (and distressing) photograph but rather of the witnesses' connection to the sequence: as each photograph reveals the same event, told differently, again and again. Jeff calls the event itself 'barely visible', in fact it is less than that: nothing is visible but the witness themselves, the photographs obscured by their own self-reference, cleverly and cruelly situating death at the heart of all visible moments; erasing them instantly.

This exploration of the event of death, the witness, history and representation is not new. It repeats the central concerns of so many works of art, literature, theatre and music. Yet what *Life is Perfect* enables is a view of the event as remains, as testimony, through the eyes of each witness that encounters it. Alongside this transgression of the private moment of the witness into an almost archival identity it will be useful to examine a consideration of testimony by Derrida:

What I say for the first time, if it is a testimony, is already a repetition, at least a repeatability; it is already an iterability, more than once at once, more than an instant in one instant, at the same time; and that being the case, the instant is always divided at its very point, at the point of its writing. It is always on the verge [*en instance*] of being divided, whence the problem of idealization. To the extent that it is repeatable, the singular instant becomes an ideal instant. (Derrida, 2000, pp. 41–42)

The remains of *Life is Perfect* (the photographs) work in this fashion, as a testimony which divides by replacing the evidence they provide with the new site of the witness. The performance itself, shielded from reality by the interminable instant of the photograph, becomes idealised; as a moment towards which one testifies, having seen the permanent instant of its repetition. Performance slides into performances and the performers (at once themselves and Everycouple) slide into the fracturing mirror of self-reflection.

Derrida's essay cited above, '*Demeure: fiction and testimony*', is a response to a short story by Maurice Blanchot (collected in the same volume in English translation). It is a very brief (five page) narrative concerning a man who is almost shot by a firing squad during World War II but is released moments before death; an experience similar to one Blanchot had himself endured. In this short fiction, 'The instant of my death', an encounter with death casts a shadow over the future life to be lived, one in which 'the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him' (Blanchot, 2000, p. 9). The character remains as a witness to his own death, which did not take place only by an instant—an instant that endures throughout life. Chronology begins to disintegrate:

A disturbance in the measure of time and a paradox of these instants, which are so many heterogeneous times. Neither synchrony nor diachrony, an anachrony of all instants. *Demourance* as anachrony. There is not a single time, since one instant has no common measure with any other because of death, by reason of death interposed, in the interruption by reason of death, so to speak, because of the cause of the death there can be no chronology or chronometry. One cannot, even when one has recovered a sense of the real, measure time. And thus the question returns, how many times: how much time? how much time? how much time? (Derrida, 2000, p. 81)

In terms of *Life is Perfect* a similar problem emerges—further complicated by the representation of acts of murder—what is the instant of death, or even where is it? Derrida uses the term *demourance* (to which he devotes many of the preceding pages tracing its etymology), which may be briefly said to incorporate: abiding, remaining, a certain waiting period of appeal, a residence, and even the 'final resting place' (Derrida, 2000, pp. 77–85). Introducing the fictionalised deaths, repeated interminably over 24 hours, and represented in photographic format (taking about ten minutes to flick through), distorts the event further and makes the question 'how many times?' from the end of the quotation above, take on new and disturbing meaning. How many times do these individuals need to kill each other to communicate this impossible interval of death? The work assaults the senses to the point where you are transformed, where the chronological certainty of our own death slides into the fictionalised banality of the death we witness on each photograph. Death without measure, timeless death, comes to abide in the witness of *Life is Perfect*.

Blanchot's story, and Derrida's essay, informed the conceptual elaboration of *Life is Perfect* and it is tempting to understand the photograph series as a manifestation of the complex relationships between death, the one and the witness that Derrida makes the object of his essay in relation to literature. However the photographs, in their fusion of witness and archive into a new site of performance knowledge offer a transformation of the performed event into one which makes its own history into a mode of enquiry into the work itself. It is this curious difference—between the event as demonstrated in Blanchot's fiction, published many years later and subject to the flux of memory and the elaboration of intellect, and the event that appears through *Life is Perfect*, taken at the moment of performance, randomised and unstable—that offers the witness as a potential site for the generation of performance knowledge. Indeed, despite the hotel being an important venue for the elaboration of

the erotic narrative of the performance, the place itself—despite even the return made on the TRAWS trip, or perhaps, strangely, because of it—fades from consideration when faced with the photographs.

A brief moment in 'The instant of my death' sees the bloated corpses of horses which 'attested to a war that had gone on' (Blanchot, 2000, p. 7). Yet here the photographs, each a mirror image of one lover killing the other, become a scene of attestation to a fiction. Derrida remarks of the horses and testimony:

In the humanist logic of what we call testimony in our European culture, a horse does not testify. Nor does a body. The death of a horse does not testify to the fact that there has been war unless one is using the word attest in a rather vague sense, in the sense of an exhibit, of a document or an archive. (Derrida, 2000, p. 81)

Life is Perfect creates a different form of testimony, 'in the sense of an exhibit', 'document' or 'archive'. It is the archival remainder which abides with the witness, not to testify to the fact of a murder (or 50) having taken place, but rather to the fact that death endures in the complicit witness whose own paradoxical gaze both confirms the death that photographic archives make apparent, yet also becomes a new site for the affirmation of resistance to death: a knowledge of limitations and freedom.

Knowledge, death and testimony

We come to know a performance in situ, at the place of its presentation. This knowledge is hidden in *Life is Perfect* and provided only after the event. In the case of these photographs they have been shown to a very specific audience, some to TRAWS members, some to delegates at the *Towards Tomorrow?* conference. Yet with each showing new and secret knowledge is generated, which passes into the only sphere in which the performance works: a secret relation to death. As Barthes makes apparent in *Camera Lucida*, most specifically looking at a portrait of Lewis Payne before his execution in 1865, all pictures are a sign of death:

It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each one of us, one by one, outside of any generality (but not outside of any transcendence). Further, photographs, except for an embarrassed ceremonial of a few boring evenings, are looked at when one is alone. (Barthes, 2000, p. 97)

This aspect of viewing the picture *alone* is particularly of interest here, because the privacy of engagement with *Life is Perfect* is mirrored in the privacy of its creation, the content itself—erotic and also repugnant—works critically on the gazing eye which knows at once that it is in the process of transgression. What Jeff has succeeded in doing with this work is creating a form and content so bound with each other that every instant of the photograph being perceived repeats the paradox of its generation: creating an elliptical knowledge that repeats our own relation to death (an event we will not experience in life, as Wittgenstein says).³ Jeff even locates this event in the sequence of performance creation and shutter release:

The performative sequence, which precedes each shutter release, although not present in the final image, adds that element of un-representability to the photograph. Without that invisible investment the photographs would revert to mere set-ups, with it come reverberations, ramifications, retribution and reconciliation. The paradox of the photograph is made visible in the relationship between the dispassionate record and the passionate action. The images are baroque both in their intellectual impetus and sometimes in their eventual manifestation. Each image is like a crescendo; the act of photography, like the act of sex, and life itself are each bound up in a moment of perfection. The instant of death is with us always in its very inevitability. (Jeff, 2004)

What tracing through the transformation of this material, from performance, to revisit, and conference presentation shows is the enduring knowledge of the staged event is dependent on a certain testimonial. The witness, whether they class themselves as expert or amateur, generates the mobile space of meaning which cannot be recovered. The site of performance exists to haunt itself, through memory and a gradually degraded archive (of whatever form). Whatever trace remains of the site of performance it is ultimately a knowledge paraded before death, but not triumphantly, rather more like a spectacle that knows its own demise. Performance is just such a knowledge, admitting at the outset its ephemeral nature and swift transition to the world of the dead. Derrida in conversation with Bernard Steigler interestingly touches on this:

In the series of more or less equivalent words that accurately designate haunting, *specter*, as distinct from *ghost* [*revenant*], speaks of the spectacle. The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood. It resists the intuition to which it presents itself, it is not *tangible*. (Derrida & Steigler, 2002, p. 115)

The spectre that is the ‘invisible visible’ can describe the artefacts that constitute *Life is Perfect*. These photographs that, because they are staged, seem to dwell in some perpetual twilight between a knowledge of death and its impossibility show us how performance knowledge can manifest elaborate gradations of effect, which have transformed the site of the work into only one place through which it speaks.

In terms of research outcomes perhaps there is little to show for *Life is Perfect*, the TRAWS research weekend and the presentation at *Towards Tomorrow?*. However as a moment of interaction, of consideration and reflection, the impact, certainly for me, has been immeasurable. Whilst such a word may seem to be hyperbole it actually shows the impact that research should have, and opens again the central issues of the private and communal. Such a continual process, that hopefully the many ellipses that appear in this essay—photograph and death, research and practice, performance and theory—have identified, will enable more creative utilisation of research that will feed back into the environment of higher education. In terms of duration this practical research event was almost as short lived as the performance of *Life is Perfect* and similarly it endures through a collection of photographs and varied testimonies concerning what happened, when and why. The research remains themselves are sites of contestation. As we saw earlier the remains of the work as testimony may persist, as a dead horse also might, as an archival attestation of the event, yet there

also remains an elusive knowledge, directly related to death, and integral to performance, and to research itself: it is invisible, unknown, and in witnessing we have all become a site through which such knowledge passes.

Notes

1. TRAWS is a research group with no central institution. They meet at various sites across Wales to investigate site-specific work. Members of the group are Professor Richard Gough, Jill Greenhalgh, Richard Huw Morgan, Paul Jeff, Dr Lisa Lewis, Dr Roger Owen, Professor Mike Pearson, Steve Robins, Dr Heike Roms, Nic Ros and Dr Daniel Watt.
2. See Chapter One, 'Tod Browning's America', in Skal (2001) which details the live burial trick performed by Tod Browning as 'The Hypnotic Living Corpse'.
3. '6.4311 Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. . . . Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits' (Wittgenstein, 1995, p. 72).

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