

Performing Massacre

Efterpi Mitsi

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Abstract

Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, a play which probably dates from 1592 but has reached posterity in a mangled form, enacts the incorporation of religious and state politics in the theatre. Through a sequence of short scenes characterized by senseless brutality and black humor, Marlowe revisits one of the darkest episodes of French history, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place on the 24th and 25th August 1572. Dramatizing the slaughter of thousands of Protestants by Catholics, the play not only reflects on the significance of massacre as a political term for an increasingly absolutist Renaissance Europe but also translates the violence of massacre into aesthetic form. Itself alien within the body of Marlowe's dramatic works, *The Massacre at Paris* has rarely been performed after its Elizabethan successful performances at the Rose; this is not surprising given the state of the extant text and its dismissal by many critics as crude anti-Catholic propaganda. Yet, the *Massacre's* corrupt and incomplete form, political ambiguities and emphasis on theatrical violence have inspired two contemporary artists, the French director Guillaume Delaveau and the Austrian composer Wolfgang Mitterer, to rethink and revive it. Both Delaveau's *Massacre à Paris*, first performed at Toulouse in 2007 and Mitterer's experimental opera *Massacre*, composed in 2003 and performed in 2008 and 2010 in France, refer to recent wars and atrocities and rejoice in the irony of the play. This paper seeks to investigate the play's ability to convey political thought and provoke contemporary audiences by reading it together with Delaveau and Mitterer's adaptations. The challenge of reworking the *Massacre* for our age involves the question of the theatre's potential to expose the audience to the horror of history.

Keywords: theatre, history, violence

Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, a play which probably dates from 1592 but has reached posterity in a mangled form, assembled from its actors' memories in an undated octavo, enacts the incorporation of religious and state politics in the theatre. Through a sequence of short scenes characterized by senseless brutality and black humour, Marlowe revisits one of the darkest episodes of French history; the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place on the 24th and 25th August 1572. Dramatizing the slaughter of thousands of Protestants by Catholics, the play not only reflects on the significance of massacre as a political term for an increasingly absolutist Renaissance Europe, but also translates the bloodshed of massacre into a new theatrical idiom.¹ Massacre is the central concept of the play; the new word that entered English in the late 1570s appears eleven times in the play² as well as in its title, in reference to the historical event. Although Marlowe must

¹ Graham Hamill connects Marlowe's political thought to the violence presented on stage, arguing that Marlowe explores "the ways in which affective responses to representations of the political act repeat the violence of the act in an aesthetic register" (292).

² It appears ten times in the dialogue of the play, seven times as noun and three times as verb, as well as once in the opening stage directions of scene 5. The noun entered the English language around 1575-85, originating from Middle French *massacre* "wholesale slaughter, carnage," from Old French *macacre*, *macecle* "slaughterhouse, butchery." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this is the first use of the word

have first encountered the word during his adolescence in Canterbury from French Huguenot refugees,³ his use of the word is not just factual; as Graham Hamill argues, massacre functions in his plays as a “node of political thought,” a “necessary, not incidental, component of sovereignty” (292). In *The Massacre at Paris*, King Charles emphasizes the importance of Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre by proclaiming that it “will be noted through the world / An action bloody and tyrannical” (5.5-6). As word and act, “massacre” has a plurality of meanings in the play, both literal and figurative; from the slaughter of the Huguenots to the murder of Admiral Coligny and Queen Margaret’s avowal that her soul is massacred (3.26). Marlowe’s exploration of massacre centres, above all, on its theatrical representation and effect on the spectators.

Itself alien within the body of Marlowe’s dramatic works, *The Massacre at Paris* has rarely been performed after its successful performances at the Rose;⁴ this is not surprising given the state of the extant text, which is assumed to be half of the original, and its dismissal by earlier critics as crude anti-Catholic propaganda.⁵ Even in a recent assessment of *The Massacre at Paris*, Sara Munson Deats, while deploring its neglect, expressed doubt about whether “in its present corrupt form it could be successfully performed today” (204). The indifference of modern theatre practitioners toward *The Massacre* contrasts to its appeal in 1593, when the play’s gate takings were the highest of the season (Poole 4).⁶

In the past decades, *The Massacre at Paris* has been reevaluated, provoking a number of critical readings that emphasize its ironic and interrogative mode. Starting with Julia Briggs, who first challenged the earlier assessment of the play as mere propaganda, scholars have argued that *The Massacre* exposes the pointlessness and hypocrisy of religious and state violence. For example, Hamill, Paul Voss, Andrew Kirk, Richard Hillman and Pauline Kewes have all explored the play’s engagement with history, stressing that Marlowe raises serious questions on religion, sovereignty and the state, in response to the political thought of his time.⁷ At the same time, even its defenders acknowledge that the play lacks the complexity and introspection of Marlowe’s other dramas written around the same time, like *Dr Faustus*. According to Kirk, the play is chaotic, recreating “French history as a series of meaningless violent acts” (193). The protagonist, the Duke of Guise, seems like “a parody of the Marlovian overreacher” (Deats 202), while other characters are constantly changing their views and behaviour—like Henry III, who appears both as a weak and passive hedonist, and a deceitful Machiavellian figure.

Yet, the *Massacre*’s corrupt and incomplete form, political ambiguities, and emphasis on

to name a historical event, and is responsible for the migration of the word from France into the English language.

³ See Riggs 31–34.

⁴ The first production of *The Massacre at Paris* could be one marked “ne[w]” in Henslowe’s Diary for January 1593 which records the earnings at The Rose for a performance of *The Tragedy of the Guise* by Lord Strange’s Men, probably with Edward Alleyn in the cast. See the records in Henslowe’s Diary in Foakes and Rickert 20.

⁵ See Sanders and Kocher.

⁶ Henslowe’s records show that the play was also a financial success for the Rose in 1594, when performed by the Admiral’s Men; it was also revived by the Admiral’s Men in 1601. See Wiggins and Richardson 1593.

⁷ Marlowe engages with the political thinking of Machiavelli and Jean Bodin (see Hamill) and with the doctrine of the reason of state, “advanced in the late 1580s by the Flemish thinker Justus Lipsius and the Italian Giovanni Botero, who resort to extreme and often dubious measures in meeting the political needs of the moment” (Kewes 148).

theatrical violence, inspired two contemporary artists, the French director Guillaume Delaveau and the Austrian composer Wolfgang Mitterer, to revive it. Both Delaveau's *Massacre à Paris*—an adaptation of Marlowe's play, first performed at Toulouse in 2007—and Mitterer's experimental opera *Massacre*—composed in 2003 and performed in 2008, 2009 and 2010 in France and Portugal, under the direction of Ludovic Lagarde—refer to recent wars and atrocities, and rejoice in the irony of the play, commenting on the human attraction to crime and the absurdity of violence. Reflecting on Marlowe's play through Delaveau and Mitterer's adaptations, I argue for its power to convey political thought and provoke contemporary audiences. The challenge of reworking the *Massacre* for our age and effectively translating its frenetic assault on the senses involves the question of the theatre's potential to expose the audience to the horror of history.

These recent performances of Marlowe's play also suggest that textual corruption and uncertainty may be a challenge rather than a problem; the text's incompleteness and relative neglect troubles the philologist but frees the artist; *The Massacre at Paris* becomes a blueprint, allowing artists to deduce the issues of power struggle that they consider relevant or plausible today. In fact, the historical and cultural context of the drama relates to the occasions, inspiring its two modern revivals. Marlowe's play responded to the English public's interest in the wars of religion, an interest fed by the translations of French reports on the massacre, various pamphlets, and news accounts of the reign of Henry III. Pamphlets by Huguenot writers like François Hotman and Jean de Serres competed with accusations made by Jean du Tillet and other pro-League authors of Huguenot atrocities against Catholics, including the murder of children, and the justification by Charles IX that Bartholomew was a necessary pre-emptive measure against a possible Huguenot rebellion after the attempted assassination of Admiral Coligny.⁸ These tracts—translated and published in London—inform the play, which recreates a period of seventeen years of French history; the first part represents the massacre in 1572 and Henry III's coronation in 1575, while the fast-moving second part compresses events that occur until Henry's death in 1589, including the murder of the Duke of Guise—the drama's protagonist—in 1588. Voss has argued that the conversion of Henry IV to Catholicism in 1593, within months of Marlowe's death, would have rekindled interest in French affairs and caused repeat performances, while “revivals in 1598 and 1601 continued to draw interest and spark controversy” (124).

Despite its incompleteness, the text uses realistic representations of atrocity in its re-enactment of history—namely, eighteen murders by stabbing, shooting, poisoning and strangling performed on stage, while thousands more occur offstage. Most of these murders take place in successive scenes (from scene 5 to 10 with the exception of scene 8, which is very short), as eminent Protestants, including Admiral Coligny and the humanist Peter Ramus are attacked, abused and quickly executed. For Rick Bowers, the effect created by Guise as he stabs to death a pair of unarmed Protestant scholars, with the line “I'll whip you to death with my poniard's point” (9.79), exemplifies Marlowe's use of the knife (or sword) “as special prop, agent, and symbol for the emergence of terror as a new and devastating instrument of culture in the theatre” (19).

In the same way that Marlowe manipulates the fissures between historiography and drama

⁸On the pamphlets' debate see Kocher, Briggs, Voss and Parmelee. On Marlowe's sources see Thomas and Tydeman 249-92.

for artistic and political purposes, Delaveau and Mitterer carry out a supra-historical reading of *The Massacre at Paris*, engaged with the political incentives of their own time. Yet, even a “distorted” enactment of the play has to deal with certain inevitable questions: How can a massacre be performed? How does the audience respond to on-stage brutality? And how can a modern performance deal with the play’s turning of tragedy into burlesque, of horror into humour?

Le Massacre à Paris, directed and adapted by Delaveau, was presented by Compagnie X ici at the Théâtre National de Toulouse in 2007 and the Théâtre National de Strasbourg in 2008. The idea to direct the play came to Delaveau after the 2005 terrorist attacks in London, which followed those in Madrid and New York; he explained that Marlowe’s text “allows us to understand the current chaos by looking for the roots of evil not elsewhere but in our own history” (qtd. in Martinez).⁹ Delaveau decided to emphasize the fragmentary nature of Marlowe’s script by adding different historical and temporal references. “Marlowe,” he argued, “was unfaithful to History and so was I. I looked at this play from the perspective of my own time and space. This production is a collage in which the performing frame is the Elizabethan era” (qtd. in Rivere de Carles 143). Delaveau’s collage encompassed allusions to the Elizabethan playhouse, the *danse macabre*, the cabaret, and glam rock, using Marlowe’s representation of sectarian violence as a connecting point between the sixteenth and the twenty-first century.

In his own play, Delaveau introduced Marlowe as a red-dressed figure, to link past and present: in the beginning of the performance, Marlowe entered the stage, sat at a piano and played David Bowie’s “Space Oddity.” On the stage, a skeleton cycling on a bike, a breastplate and a sword on the left, and the piano on a gyrating platform on the right, underlined the merging of historical periods; the skeleton connected the murders of the play with the topos of the *danse macabre*, performed in churchyards during the late Middle Ages. For Clayton MacKenzie, Marlowe’s *Massacre* recalls the dance of death; the medieval allegorical performance which had survived well into the Renaissance: just as in the dance of death audiences watched actors representing all kinds of people—old and young, rich and poor, kings and beggars—being dragged off to the grave by death figures dressed in black costumes with the human skeleton painted on their clothing (MacKenzie 311), every scene in the play represents a vignette of death, whose grasp no one can escape. In Delaveau’s performance, actors dressed in black robes and pointed black hoods, reminiscent both of death and of penitent friars, carried off stage the bodies of victims. The hoods and pointed conical hats invited associations with Catholic religious orders and practices, as well as with images of death and torture. The actors’ sixteenth-century costumes contrasted to their dark sunglasses, while the period furniture of the set was juxtaposed with a screen playing videos and stills of the scenes. As Nathalie Rivere de Carles observes, Delaveau referred to the conventions of Elizabethan drama by using an almost exclusively male cast (with the exception of the part of Catherine of Medicis) and by having each actor play several parts on a flexible and multi-layered set, evocative of the Elizabethan playhouse (145).

In the press release, Delaveau stressed his inspiration from Marlowe’s “total confidence in the theatre”. “His writing,” he added, “is supported by the action of the troupe. It is

⁹All translations from French sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

essentially on the actors that it relies” (Dossier de presse 5). Similarly, Delaveau relied on his own troupe to fill the stage with simultaneous, frantic action. He increased the massacre scenes of the play, such as Coligny’s murder, adding the visual representation of the slaughter of the Huguenots, which was only mentioned in the text by Guise and his associates (7.60-66 and 9.20-24).

Furthermore, Delaveau exploited the theatricality of such brutal scenes, using elements of the cabaret and dumb show to undercut the realism of stage violence. As he stated, if Marlowe’s writing gives actors “the opportunity of dying on stage, it allows them, immediately after, to be reborn in other characters. It encourages them to disguise and to summon up the clown as well as the tragic figure” (Dossier de presse 5). His staging combined scenes of extreme violence with slapstick comedy, highlighting the absurdity and theatricality of the murders represented in the play. For Delaveau, “the *Massacre* confuses the quiet order of genres. It intensely mixes the comic and the tragic, so that one cannot happen without the other. Like a beast with two voracious heads, they devour each other and provoke an unexpected theatre” (Dossier de presse 5). He also reinforced the metadramatic element of the text, presenting the slaughter of the Protestants as a performance plotted and directed by Guise, underscored by bells that signal the beginning and end of the killing; the duke of Guise points out at the end of his soliloquy in scene 2: “The plot is laid, and things shall come to pass/Where resolution strives for victory” (2.107-108), while Catherine of Medicis—the Queen Mother—adds in scene 4: “And as we late decreed we may perform” (4.4). Guise, in whose face Marlowe embodies death and murder—“Pale death may walk in furrows of my face” (2.101)—functions in typical Marlovian fashion as author, director and actor of the Huguenots’ massacre.

In Delaveau’s staging Guise was counterbalanced by Marlowe, present in the unfolding of his play. In the video projected onscreen, the director showed Marlowe as a member of a troupe of actors that arrive by train at the Gare du Nord. By reinventing Marlowe as a character in the play, Delaveau ironically commented on the representation of violence; while the audience watched successive scenes of killing, Marlowe intervened in interludes addressing the spectators, playing music, singing and reciting poetry—from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s poems to David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” and “Heroes.” Bowie’s lyrics (“We could be heroes / just for one day”) sounded both ironic and poignant, urging the audience to reflect on the power struggle hidden under the guise of religious fanaticism in the past and the present. In addition, the image of the actors disembarking from the Eurostar at Paris humorously suggested that this was a contemporary French interpretation of an English text, itself interpreting French history. Just as the *Massacre* had assaulted the senses of its original English audiences, who were called to identify in disturbing ways with the victims of the massacre, so Delaveau’s staging bombarded spectators with powerful visual scenes, music, props and videos. By intensifying the play’s distorted performance of history and temporality, Delaveau suggested that massacres defy a neat interpretation and representation.

The sounds and metadramatic effects of *The Massacre at Paris* also inspired Wolfgang Mitterer’s opera *Massacre*, composed in 2003.¹⁰ Mitterer, a prolific composer, organist and

¹⁰ Initially commissioned by the Wiener Festwochen, the opera was first performed there in 2003. In this paper, I refer to the 2008 production, as mentioned earlier. Mitterer has explained that “every new production should be in some way a new version of the work” (Interview 42).

pioneer of electroacoustic music, combined instrumental music and vocals with electronic sounds and noises, to create a startling musical event based on Marlowe's drama. Mitterer's musical interpretation of the play depended on dramatic narrative, staged performance, and complex music. Linda and Michael Hutcheon point out that the impact of opera "likely derives from what might be called an excess of effect: the combination of the dramatic, the narrative, the thematic, along with the verbal, the visual, the auditory" (7). Acknowledging the excess which is already present in Marlowe's text, Mitterer and Lagarde's collaboration fully exploited the opera's intrinsic "excess of effect."

The soundscape of Mitterer's *Massacre* took its cue from the sounds of the massacre in Marlowe's play. In the opening scene, the king's invitation to a "hearing of the mass" ("And now, my lords the marriage-rites performed, / We think it good to go and consummate / The rest, with hearing of an holy mass" 1.18-20) ironically foreshadows the sounds that will be associated with the slaughter of the Huguenots. The senses are further singled out in Guise's first soliloquy, where sight, hearing and touch become the deadly instruments of his power:

As Caesar to his soldiers, so say I:
 Those that hate me, will I learn to loathe.
 Give me a look, that when I bend the brows,
 Pale death may walk in furrows of my face,
 A hand, that with a grasp may gripe the world,
 An ear, to hear what my detractors say,
 A royal seat, a sceptre and a crown;
 That those which do behold, they may become
 As men that stand and gaze against the sun. (2.98-106)

It is the sound of a bell that will give the signal to begin the massacre, as Guise announces in scene 4. As the director of the plot, or monstrous play, he explains that the bell is the curtain call for his actors-murderers, who will not stop killing until they hear again their cue—the bell's ringing:¹¹

QUEEN MOTHER. ...Then tell me, Guise,
 What order will you set down for the Massacre?
 GUISE. Thus, Madame:
 They that shall be actors in this massacre,
 Shall wear white crosses on their burgonets,
 And tie white linen scarfs about their arms;
 He that wants these, and is suspect of heresy,
 Shall die, or be he king or emperor. Then I'll have
 A peal of ordinance shot from the tower,
 At which they all shall issue out and set the streets;
 And then, the watchword being given, a bell shall ring,
 Which when they hear, they shall begin to kill,
 And never cease until that bell shall cease,

¹¹He further associates Bartholomew to a play when he then refers to the murder of Coligny as "the entrance" of the massacre (5.11).

Then breathe a while. (4.26-39)

Mitterer's opera for five singers—two sopranos, one mezzo, one countertenor and one baritone—depends on the power of sound to accentuate Marlowe's aesthetics of massacre. Marie-Aude Roux's review in *Le Monde* defines the *Massacre's* 2008 production as a "gripping film concert," "a symphony of terror," in which the composer's own haunting presence, dressed in a black hood, tall and emaciated, playing the keyboard alone in front of a screen, "reminds of Nosferatu" (Roux). Lagarde's staging emphasized the competing sounds of the opera—live sounds, song and instrumental music, merging with computer-generated sounds and noises—by adding a complex visual collage made up of a number of large and small screens, which projected words and videos: a naked woman running, images of war and destruction, industrial designs and machinery, and symbols like burning crosses and targets. Marlowe's excess of violence was thus mirrored in an excess of sensory stimulation, relying both on the devices of opera and the techniques of the postmodern stage; the performance was a pastiche not just of different sounds but also of different texts, citations, and artistic and media forms.

Mitterer's opera opened in total darkness; then one big screen beneath an array of seven small screens lit up with numbers and grey images. The performers sang on a small lit area of the stage, while a cameraman on a trolley moved in front of them, projecting the filmed images on the big screen; at the same time, close-ups of the singers were shown on the seven small screens above the stage. The human voices interacted with the music of the orchestra as well as with the electronic music, producing jarring sounds—the noise of helicopters, explosions, and alarms—arranged by Mitterer himself. This interaction created a unique landscape of sound representative of Mitterer's compositions, where the poetic world of natural sounds confronts the "reflections of the real sound garbage that surrounds us daily" ("Music by a Counter Musician"). Lagarde juxtaposed the live video projection with stylized period costumes, transforming Marlowe's play into a complex and eclectic expressive mixture; lyrical voices, instruments, electronic sounds, moving images and lights became a spectacular collage that attacked the spectators' senses. Both musical composition and direction introduced Marlowe's play into the twenty-first century: just as the instrumental score was set against contemporary "noises," the Renaissance costumes of the singers clashed with the black and bare stage and the video screens that projected images from violent conflicts in the Middle East.

When Mitterer was asked why he had chosen Marlowe's play for his opera, he answered that it was because of "his strong and very simple writing. It is important for me to give the singers words which can captivate their soul" (Interview 42). He added that the Iraq war, which had then just begun, was the political stimulus for his composition: "What challenged me most was that the confrontation seemed to take place for reasons of money, interest, possession ... under the apparent philosophical reasons of opinion or belief. It is like that in every era" (Interview 42). His reading of *The Massacre at Paris* through the lens of current conflicts is evident both in the music and the libretto; written in English by Mitterer and Stephan Müller, the libretto is divided in three parts and seventeen scenes, presenting only a fragment of the events that take place in Marlowe's play.¹²

¹²See the program of the production in Musica Strasbourg, 2008. The CD recording, Col Legno, 2010, is divided in 3 acts and 49 tracks.

Like Delaveau, Mitterer defended his loose representation of historical events and the compression of Marlowe's play into the most significant scenes and characters (six in total), stating that parts A, B, and C could be seen as "three different illuminations on different situations" and insisting that "[t]here really is no continuity in the opera: there are 'spots,' a 'focus' on situations independent of each other. I also do not think we should overstate Saint Bartholomew. We should let the singers sing" (Interview 43). In the performance, the titles given to each sequence—words like treason, plot, execution, lamentation and hell—were also projected on the screen, underlining both the episodic structure of the opera, and the dialogue between the aggressors on stage and the projected images of war and massacre. The video art was instrumental, forcing the spectators' eyes to constantly move from the killings on stage to those on the screen—a discomfort enhanced by the soprano Elizabeth Calleo's colorature and the high-pitch screams of the other singers.

As Anne-Marie Le Baillif points out, despite similarities in the representation of violence, Mitterer's opera did not draw a simplistic correspondence between eras (61). By privileging excess, Mitterer's collage questioned the contemporary spectators' complacent and aseptic viewing of violence. In fact, the libretto refuses the ambiguous catharsis of the play; instead of concluding with the restoration of the fragile order accomplished through the murder of Henry and the avowal of Navarre to avenge his death as the new king, Henry IV, it stops at the triumph of Henry III, who asserts the state of exception after assassinating Guise. In the libretto, Henry III proclaims "I am the king/ I am the king/ I am the king", evoking the absolute will of the sovereign. If Marlowe, as Hamill argues, reveals in his plays "what absolutist political thought obscures, calling out and making explicit [its implied] logic of violence" (293), then Mitterer's *Massacre* translated the politics of early modern sovereign power into a contemporary discourse, warning about the endless repetition of conflicts; the never-to-be resolved struggle for power masked under religious or ideological pretence. The emphasis on death through image, sound and movement (screams, explosions, gun firing, murders and corpses on stage) challenged the audience's passive acceptance of representations of violence in the media as trite and banal events. In their analysis of death in opera, Linda and Michael Hutcheon examine the "double pull ... between emotional identification and intellectual distance" which "lies at the heart of audience responses to dramatized death," arguing that the "fact that opera is sung, in other words that its artifice is manifest and audible, both complicates and simplifies any discussion of artistic distancing" (22-23). Accordingly, the failure of catharsis in Mitterer's opera tested the audience's affective and aesthetic response to pain and suffering. The sounds and images of contemporary violence undermined the audience's sense of moral superiority toward the barbarism of the past. Just as Marlowe's play revisited the French religious war, inviting playgoers to simultaneously feel disturbing identification with the victims of the massacre and self-estrangement, Mitterer's opera, with its complex musical language and collage of electronic images, asked audiences to face the politics of massacre and question the aesthetic pleasure derived from its representation.

Marlowe's focus on crises and states of emergency, his use of the audience's affective response to stage politics is what Delaveau and Mitterer's adaptations share. Placing their own notion of massacre at the heart of their reading of *The Massacre at Paris*, they offer an

artistic revaluation of a text described by critics and editors as mangled, confused, or simply bad. Also, they both raise the question whether a state of crisis can aesthetically benefit an artist. For Janet Clare, Marlowe's development of an "aesthetic of cruelty" radicalized the experience of performance in the Elizabethan era (79). Connecting Marlowe's performative violence with Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, Clare argues that the playwright transforms myth and history, separating violent effects from moral paradigms; thus, he prevents a placid audience response, assaults the sensory perceptions of playgoers, and "makes theatre a dangerous and intimidating experience" (87). Similarly, Bowers emphasizes that the "kinaesthetic experience" of Marlowe's theatre enables audiences to dwell in their reactions and "achieve a complicated empathy" (25). The recent dramatic refractions of *The Massacre*, eliciting both pleasure and distress, hinder comfortable emotional and moral responses; they succeed in revisiting Marlowe's aesthetics of violence, inviting contemporary spectators to experience self-estrangement, as well as an uncomfortable empathy.

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