




Sound Semiotics of Osundare's Poetry

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Abstract: In his article "Sound Semiotics of Osundare's Poetry" Christopher Anyokwu postulates that in our increasingly chirographically and typographically oriented culture and society, we often forget how tenacious and over-arching the oral continues to be. Semiotics, the science of signs, highlights among others how speech acts and speech sounds are deployed in everyday human interactions to convey meaning and communicate humanity's need for understanding and fulfillment. This meaning-signaling potential of the tonality of language is even more pronounced in most African languages which are, unlike English, syllable timed and tonal in nature. This tonal nature of African languages is appropriated by Niyi Osundare who uses the sound imagery and symbolism of the Yoruba language to convey meaning in his poetry.

Christopher ANYOKWU

Sound Semiotics of Osundare's Poetry

In our so-called postmodern age, the task of semiotics as a field of intellectual enquiry looms large considering the argument advanced by Terry Eagleton about the collapse or/and the conflation of "reality" and "virtual reality" generated by the mass media, notably the internet (see Eagleton, *After Theory* 67). In the light of this nexus between social actualities and hyper-reality, sign systems play an important role. This holds even more as meaning can be accessed through a complex interplay of a network of signs implying a myriad of things. Lois Tyson tells us that "semiotics recognizes language as the most fundamental and important sign system" (206) and Eagleton argues that "every literary text is made up of a number of 'systems' (lexical, graphic, metrical, phonological and so on), and gains its effects through constant clashes and tensions between these systems" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 102). Tyson goes on to draw attention to the centrality of the linguistic sign in the discussion of semiotics and notes that "semiotics expands the signifier to include objects, gestures, activities, sounds, images — in short, anything that can be perceived by the senses" (206). Semiotics explores three major aspects of the linguistic sign, namely index, icon, and symbol. However, according to Tyson, "semiotics limits its study to signs that function as symbols" (206). A symbol, then, is "a sign in which the relationship between signifier and signified is neither natural nor necessary, but arbitrary, that is, decided upon by the convention of a community, by the agreement of some group" (Tyson 207). Thus, language is "an example of a symbolic sign system" (Tyson 207). What semiotics, therefore, does in textual explication is "to isolate and analyze the symbolic function of sign systems, although the objects or behaviors under investigation will often have other functions as well" (Tyson 207).

In the article at hand I analyze Osundare's poetry based on tenets of semiotics. Osundare's Native language is Yoruba and "translates" Yoruba orality to English in his poetry: "while English is a stress-timed [ST] language, Yoruba is a syllable-timed [SL] one operating through a complex system of tones and glides. In [Yoruba] language, prosody mellows into melody. Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding" ("Yoruba Thought" 11). A similar point is made by Pamela Olubunmi Smith as she tries to investigate the difficulty of transference from the highly tonal Yoruba syllable-isochronic SL to the much less tonal English stress-isochronic TL in which "verbal word play involving onomatopoeia, pun and phonoaesthetics lose their bite and force" (357). Throwing much-needed light on the nature of the Yoruba language, Yoruba ethno-musicologist, Akin Euba suggests that "the semantic function of Yoruba speech tones result in an active movement between the three tone levels of the language, producing in turn a high degree of sub-musical activity and what could be construed as real musical activity is so small that Yoruba speech may be regarded as lying just outside the periphery of music" (476). In order to appreciate Osundare's poetry, it is important for us to come to terms with the phonological and sonic features of the Yoruba language whose expropriation constitutes the figural and epistemological background of his poetry drawing as he does upon both his Native oral poetic sources and, of course, the Western poetry tradition generally and English poetry in particular. Since poetry is a verbal act, Osundare utilizes the sound patterns of Yoruba, a sounding code which imparts delicate shades of meaning at various levels of syntax. Osundare calls this practice "redolent tonalities" (*Waiting Laughters* 2). The redolent tonalities conveyed in Osundare's verse are produced through a deployment and application of phono-aesthetic elements as lexical matching, repetition, parallelism, tonal counterpoint, consonances, assonances, alliteration, and other allied sound symbols and images such as ideophones and onomatopoeia.

Osundare's reliance on sound imagery and sound symbolism in his poetry is in part informed by the prevailing artistic/literary temperament of his immediate Nigerian and African predecessors such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, and Michael C.J. Echeruo whose poetries are to a large extent modeled on Archibald MacLeish's prescription to the effect that "poetry should not mean but be" (Arp and Johnson 734). This type of extreme aestheticism and the consequent depersonalization of art was and is still considered by Osundare as un-African, alienating, rarified, and ultimately elitist, a practice which does not recognize the role of the African local audience as the final arbiters of taste and the actual producers/owners of *poiesis* in the first place.

Thus, unlike the Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry, or what some critics refer to as the second generation of Nigerian poets (the first being the pioneering politician-poets of the 1940s and the 1950s), Osundare revolted against the MacLeish doctrine by creating what Funso Aiyejina called the "Alter/Native Tradition" of Nigerian poetry, a truly revolutionary *volte-face*. In this context, the poet in a salutary gesture of atavism brings into the performance of his/her verse the use of musical instruments such as drums, gong, flute, and castanets. This orchestration of poetry also relies on antiphonal style which involves the listening audience not just as passive public but as dynamic, active participants in the performance of poetry. For Osundare, then, poetry must "mean" and for this he mobilizes sound to create, produce, and transmit sense: "tone is the power-point, the enabling element in a Yoruba communicative event" ("Yoruba Thought" 11).

This crucial role of sound and tonality in African verbal arts, and in Osundare's poetry in particular, is what Ruth Finnegan describes as "oral tradition, speech, the verbal arts, orality, voice, audition, words, Africa: the images and the experiences hang together" (2). Further, in highlighting the multi-modal and multi-media nature of sound Finnegan articulates how people do things with words and to words "in many ways and senses-performing them, entextualising them, playing with them at many levels, organizing them in time, uttering them, enscribing them in written forms, decorating them multi-modally, reflecting on and through them, interpreting them, perhaps even downplaying them compared to other media" (3-4). The ethnography of speaking or the textualization of speech sounds, according to Finnegan, emphasizes the "processual, contextualized, ideological and socially situated dimensions of language" (6). Sound, then, conceived as verbalized action is employed by Osundare to convey a class-conscious and people-oriented message and he blends the oral resources of his Yoruba Native tongue and his acquired language, English, in order to "approximate [the] English language to Yoruba. English [being] a 'meaning' language essentially; Yoruba [being] a 'sounding' language" (Adagbonyin 124).

Osundare as a trained linguist and stylistician is an expert user of syntax: "I found out that syntax is a very powerful weapon in the hands of a poet ... in most poems, when you take the word on their individual basis, you understand what they are saying, but it is not so when the words are combined... we make syntax mean" (Osundare qtd. in Adagbonyin 108). Individual words, therefore, carry meaningful sounds either used singly or in connected speech. *bata*, *omele*, *gangan*, *ibembe*, *gbedu* — all different kinds of Yoruba drums — convey meaning by the vocal realization of their names. These drums do not only establish a sense of local habitation as well as local color, contextually speaking, they also convey ambience of the poem's performance. Indeed, these words are thematically strategic as the Osundare dramatizes in "A Dialogue of Drums" (*Village Voices* 5-6). Osundare also utilizes the poetic word to produce meaning through the use of some reiterative devices such as repetition, verbal matching, and parallelism. In the lengthy poem sequence in *Waiting Laughters* (10-15), Osundare draws attention to "Waiting" by foregrounding it in the subject position and the series of couplets and other varied forms of stanza patterning are set off by the word "waiting" which recurs repeatedly when the sequence is intoned, chanted, sung, or performed. To be sure, every word in an Osundare poem is used more for its aural power than as a mere lexical item in a syntagmatic relationship with other words to create meaningful utterance (on this, see Na'Allah; Ododo). According to Osundare, "in the realm of incantatory poetry, it is words — or rather their sounding — which provoke the universal sympathies, make things happen or unhappen, intrude the chanter's will upon the universe of the seen and unseen, and convert that will into a demand and that demand into a command which insists on fulfillment" ("Yoruba Thought" 13).

Consider, for instance, the following excerpt: "Some spring into domes / Some into temples / Some into steel-legged pillar / Some into gold / Some into diamond / Some into multiple stars / In the firmament of stone" (*Midlife* 10). *Midlife*, the volume of poetry from which the above passage is excerpted, is an "exchange, an unwavering engagement with the world, a dynamic treasury of noetic probings and rooted voyagings mediated through epic syntax and experimentation in the choric blend of rhetoric and song" (x). Conceived primarily as a blend of *ofo* (incantatory poetry) and *oriki* (panegyric poetry), the above passage is supposed to be chanted or performed against musical and/or instrumental background. The resultant rhythmic sound of 'some' recurring in every line produces "the prosody [that] mellows into melody" (*Midlife* x). Osundare creates words through various strategies to achieve economy of means and thus he constructs words mainly for their auditory function through

such stylistic and rhetorical means as lengthening, as in "sighlens" (*The Word is an Egg* 54). Here, "signlens" is lengthened morphologically from "silence" both to convey graphological import and a hinting at an ideological criticism of oppressive regimes, notably postcolonial Nigeria. Osundare also uses lexical cramping, for instance "fromswamptosavannah," blending as in "moonechoes" (*Moonsongs*), neologism as in "unveils" (*Songs of the Marketplace*), "untrouser" (*A Nib in the Pond*), "foresings" (*Songs of the Marketplace*), "headmasterly" (*The Eye of the Earth*), "shadesome" (*Days*); onomatopoeia like "onibanbantiba" (*Waiting Laughters*), "some into gba/some into gbu some into gbaagbuu/mehunmatapa" (*Midlife*). Explaining the semiotic import of this gba / gbu passage, Osundare writes that "the interpretation of gba and gbu must start in the mouth before proceeding to the brain! The heaviness of the labio-velar plosive /gb/; the contrasting realization of the open vowel /a/ and the close /u/; the coming together of both syllables and lengthening (through doubling) of both vowels in gbaagbuu is all intended to produce an oral-aural bang with a resonance which reaches back to primordial times. Signified here is the inevitability of diversity (gba versus gbu) and the necessity of unity (gbaagbuu) within a liberating context of the sense of common origins (mehunmatapa)" ("Yoruba Thought" 22). gba/gbu, gbaagbuu, and mehunmatapa are semantically meaningless words, but Osundare invests them with diverse meanings by expropriating and exploring their contrasting sounds or tonalities. He also uses untranslatable words such as "jambata jambo ja" (*Horses of Memory* 37-38). In the volume *The Word Is an Egg*, the poem entitled "Invocations of the Word" relies on such untranslatable items for aesthetic and thematic references: "Unwind the wind / Give rapid legs to the crouching leaf; / The horse of words has galloped / Through clouds, through thunder, through roaring water ... / Throw open the door of your ears / araba ponmbé ponmbé ponmbé / araba ponmbé ponmbé ponmbé" (10). Similar to what Pamela Olubunmi Smith says of Akinwumi Isola's work, this Osundare's excerpt "seems to function for sound alone, but in fact, sense and sound are interwoven and interdependent. In isolation, [the passage] is obscure and semantically meaningless; however, in context, it is rhythmically meaningful and referential, riddle-like" (356). The first line of the Yoruba couplet shows the poet's exploitation of sound contrast achieved through the sonic mobilization of the high-low tonal cadence of the words/song.

At the phrasal level, Osundare depends mostly on the aesthetic, as well as the thematic use of alliteration. Beyond his rhythmic "quarrying" of the various reiterative strategies like repetition, parallelism, and tonal counterpoint, Osundare depends extensively on the use of alliteration to the extent that one may find alliteration occurring in almost every line of his verse. In his poetry volume *Tender Moments*, Osundare also relies largely on the use of alliteration for phonaesthetic and semantic purposes: "You / are the reason / the river flows in its bed / the mountain walks without stubbing a toe" (5); "You are a song so sweet in its tempting distance / my ears yearn for the magic of your softness" (15); "Swagger like a soldier / Prattle like a poetaster" (32); "Hairless heads impaled on pin necks / and ribs baring the benevolence / of the body politic" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 7); "Whose hippo hands slap the drum / Like a slab of flabby flesh" (*Village Voices* 5); "The moon, the moon is the lymph of the lore / the tail of the tribe, the AMEN of absent / prayers..." (*Moonsongs* 25), or "the clown/in every crown/ ... which re-connect/ the broken bricks of / Babel... These words walk on water/ and they do not sink" (*The Word Is an Egg* 34). Related to this reliance upon alliteration for meaning is Osundare's use of assonance and consonance as witness most of the Yoruba lexical items which litter the landscape of his poetry, for example in his *The Eye of the Earth* *ogééré amokoyeri; elulu; agbegilodo; oro; iroko; patanmo; olosunta*. Osundare's oralizing of his written verse through his use of Yoruba orality patterned as it is after the English Augustan poetic tradition popularized by Alexander Pope (Ogundele 28). Further, as part of his incorporation of traditional Yoruba poetry, Osundare utilizes also such oral poetic sub-genres as *owe* (proverbial lore), *epe* (curses and abuses), direct address and *ofo* (incantations), *oriki* (praise poetry), *ijala*, (hunters' chant), *ese ifa* (divination poetry), *alo apamo* (riddles), *ekun iyawo* (bridal song), and *iremoje* (valedictory dirges/songs). The adroit and deft mediation between the oral material and the English-language product is a tribute to the poet's virtuosity and versatility as a conscious craftsman and trained artist.

As demonstrated above, Osundare exploits the musicality of the Yoruba language (on the musicality of Yoruba, see, e.g. Euba) and he expresses also in an interview: "Adagbonyin: You place a great deal of emphasis on performance while composing your poems. There's always the presence of a drum, a flute, or some musical instrument somewhere. Is this part of your attempt to not only

demonstrate the debt you owe to orature but to deliberately forge a poetics for modern African poetry generally? Osundare: I would say it's a combination of the two. But in a way I didn't go out of my way to formulate a poetics. Maybe what I tried to do was to assiduously cultivate what I could from the poetics which African orature already offered" (Adagbonyin 81). African societies and cultures are fundamentally communalist and as such it is inconceivable for the oral raconteur to create his tales, songs, or poems without his audience playing a vital role, since, often, he must perform before a live audience who deliver their judgment on the performer and the performance *in situ*. Thus, the audience participates actively in the bard's performance as, most of the time, the material the bard is performing is a product of common cultural patrimony which the bard endeavors to creatively manipulate with his "individual talent" without doing violence, holistically speaking, to the oral inheritance. Oral performances in Africa is, therefore, dialogic, participatory, celebratory, choric, antiphonal (see Anyokwu; Babalola; Olatunji; Okpewho). For Osundare, therefore, by deliberately demystifying the language of poetry and using simple and limpid diction, as well as publishing his poems in newspapers *and* performing them before live audiences the world over, he has succeeded in constructing an oral-conscious poetics (see Ezenwa-Ohaeto 167). In addition, we need to draw attention to the burgeoning "song tradition" in contemporary African poetry, a tradition rooted in traditional society but modernized by the likes of Mazisi Kunene, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Christopher Okigbo, and popularized by the Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek (see Adagbonyin 86). Commenting on Osundare's use of songs in his verse, Ezenwa-Ohaeto writes: "There is no doubt that Osundare is a conscious artist though he sometimes uses words and songs that are not thematically relevant but technically appropriate. The Yoruba folksong 'Tere gungun maja gungun tere' ... for instance, is a rhythmic refrain, it has no meaning, but it accentuates the orality of the poem" (163).

Another major element of the poetics of Yoruba and African orature is what I term "bardic minstrelsy." As a convivial, outgoing, and gregarious people, Yoruba bards, storytellers, and dramatists are always on the move, performing their art before live audiences in village squares and marketplaces. The *oriki*, for instance, is the most popular oral form of Yoruba orature. It is deployed by oral bards to sing the praise of people ranging from children to elderly people. According to Pamela Smith, *oriki* ranges "from a mother's simple morning salutation/praise-appellation to her child to lengthy, ceremonial, professional chanter/drummer vocatives of elaborate proportions, extolling the noble deeds of rulers, *orisa*, spiritual beings, or even inanimate objects" (352-53). Professional chanters and drummers who are itinerant sing, chant, and drum "the genealogy and the noble family background" of their patrons to earn their keep. And since they must perform to impress, the *oriki* chanters' language is wholly "evocative, exclamatory, laudatory, and hyperbolic" (Smith 353) and these oral performances are backed by instrumental accompaniment. Thus Osundare's verse is patently histrionic because of the combined effects of the utilization of varied reiterative devices, sound imagery, musical accompaniment, folksongs/refrains, and the sheer tunefulness of the words themselves.

Although Osundare is influenced overwhelmingly by English Romantic poetry, particularly William Wordsworth, he is knowledgeable about and refers to non-English-language literature, for example "Sing to us about Soyinka, Guillen, Brathwaite/Neto, *walcolt*, / Ai Qing, Heaney, Mayakovsky/Okigbo, U Tamsi, Okot P'Bitek; /.../ In purple streets, in bardic quest / For a tree with a thousand roots (*Midlife* 44-45) and elsewhere he refers to Latin American poets such as Octavio Paz, Nicolás Guillén Batista, Pablo Neruda and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (see Adagbonyin; Ogundele): "what I then tried to do was to bring to bear on my work the geniuses of these different writers. But I knew this wouldn't make me a writer. I had to fall back on my background. And I keep remembering that advice in "Astrophel and Stella," one of Philip Sydney's sonnets: 'Fool' said my Muse to me. Look into your heart and write'" (Osundare qtd. in Adagbonyin 85). And into his heart, Osundare has looked – his "heart" here represents his indigenous, autochthonous Yoruba orality whose literary properties were exposed to him by Oyin Ogunba, his teacher at the University of Ibadan. Additionally, Osundare studied drama under Wole Soyinka and Dapo Adelugba. I should also add that he actually started writing plays and acting in Christ's School in the late 1960s even before entering the University of Ibadan. Thus, his romance with theater has proved decisive in the patterns and conditions of orality: "So I started writing poetry ... but the dramatist was always in me. And I said if I cannot write drama, I will end up writing dramatic poetry" (Osundare qtd. in Adagbonyin 97-98).

We encounter the lavish deployment of all sorts of "guises" in Osundare's poetry as the poet-persona dons varied masks: sometimes he is a rock, a roof, a river, a farmer, a drummer and a singer, or a raconteur or town crier. To this extent the poet's persona's first-person singular pronoun "I" actually means "we" since the poet is a peopled-persona in a Whitmanesque sense. Accordingly, like dappled clay, the poet usually transforms himself into a multiplicity of personae intimating a broadly divergent sensibilities, scenarios, and situations. This bardic role-playing and impersonation foregrounds not only the importance of the "I" of lyric poetry but under-cuts the "Death of the Author" doctrine. Further, the strategy of multi-modality or the multi-genre/multi-media nature of Osundare's verse derives in the main from his continuing romance with drama, the theater, and Yoruba oral poetry. For Osundare art is more than *mimesis* in the Aristotelian sense: "art is also metamorphosis in the Ovidian sense of the word" (Osundare qtd. in Adagbonyin 98). Thus, in this Ovidian conception of art, Osundare tries to employ rhetorical strategies such as the mask motif, poetic conceits, and even voices to dramatize and semiotize his ideological apprehension and Marxian interpretation of the world. A close reading is required to decipher the chorus of voices embedded in lexical choice in his work. To be certain, Osundare uses lexis, register, and syntax as a trained stylistician to call attention to the different voices which constitute the sonic substrata of his poetry. Consider, for instance, the poem "A Dialogue of Drums" in *Village Voices* and "Olowo debates Talaka" in *Songs of the Season* and consider the use of various profiles and masks in *Horses of Memory*. Despite what Sonnie Asonwan Adagbonyin has called the "seemingly 'prismatic' nature of *Moonsongs*" or its "hermetic masquerade" (121), the volume comes across as a lyrical and performative work even as most of the poems collected therein are constructed around musical instruments or/and are to be performed antiphonally between poet and people. Also, his volume of poetry entitled *The Word Is an Egg* (which was originally called *The Kingdom of the Tongue*) demonstrates the aural and auditory predilection of the poems.

Osundare's poetry thus goes beyond the Barthesian theory of "criptable" and "lisible" and, as Wole Ogundele notes, is fundamentally "speakerly": "man meaning [speaking] to men" (28). This phonocentrism of Osundare's verse is a salutary throwback to African orature, a chirographic revalorization of tradition and the oral patrimony of Africa. The spokenness of Osundare's poetry, then, is subversive: it is a calculated *agit-prop* and iconoclastic "proxy" war against the studied mutedness, the deafening silence of "closet" poetry as practiced by the *ancien regime* of Osundare's immediate predecessors. In this connection, therefore, it is assumed that "closet poets" are hand in glove with repressive power for which the African continent was and, sadly, is still notorious. Osundare's poetics of performance deals a blow to the conspiracy of silence created by court hagiographers and pro-establishment apologists and their principals, civilian and military alike. Consider, for instance, the poem "Trans-formations": "The emperor has hounded the Word into exile / And given silence a throne in our market place /.../ When the emperor shoots his gun at our Word / Our word will turn into earth, wind, and fire" (*The Word Is an Egg* 15). "Earth," "wind," and "fire" — three major aspects of the elements are semiotically deployed here by Osundare to underscore the quasi-mystical ties between the Word (creative artists and the productive forces in society) and Nature. The megalomaniac who violates the laws of Nature only courts self-immolation: the tyranny of silence, then, approximates the agential nullification of human presence, a scenario akin to the spineless post-modernist apologia referred to as "Death of the Author" of Roland Barthes. This critical erasure or silencing of agency adds up to reducing the human space to a void peopled at best by living-dead or cyborgs. There is nothing more un-African than this anomalous dystopia. The scripted poem, for Osundare, therefore, is similar to a play-script: the text is not meant to be condemned to the "cold impersonality of the open page" to paraphrase Isidore Okpewho, but is created as a handy source material for the poet and his/her audience to perform as a form of "Festival of Life." Thus, the choric dialogism of this peopled-persona poetry promotes the Marxist doctrines of collectivism, classlessness and egalitarianism.

I demonstrate in this study that although Niyi Osundare is a literary poet, he actually belongs to the predominantly oral culture of his Yoruba ethnic group and I present reasons why Osundare seems to be drawn to the creative expropriation of the sonic and acoustic characteristics of his Native language which is, unlike English, is syllable timed, and, more crucially, tonal in nature. Among his people, the art of conversation is highly regarded, like Chinua Achebe tells us of the people of Umuafia in *Things Fall Apart*. People in oral cultures in Africa are natural rhetoricians who enjoy language

games and using speech sounds to create meaning as a single lexical item can be produced orally in a variety of ways to convey a wider range of significations. Needless to say, much has been made of the oral inheritance, the oral bias of traditional African societies so much so that scholars and critics usually take African orality as point of entry into their discourses on speech genres, orality studies, as well as performance studies: "there is certainly no doubt of the importance of the subject for the study of Africa. For Africa is celebrated above all for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts, and as the home of oral literature, orature and orality, and the genesis and inspiration of the voiced traditions of the great diaspora" (Finnegan 1).

Commenting on the centrality of the vocal in the African tradition, Finnegan refers to Africa as "the oral continent par excellence" (1) and Abiola Irele stresses the point that orature is the "fundamental reference of discourse and of the imaginative mode in Africa (Irele qtd. in Finnegan 1). Such is the multidimensional nature of African phonocentrism that it has become more accurate to characterize the field in the plural as literacies and oralities. By the same token, therefore, we realize that in the context of poetry performance, other ancillary sub-sets are involved such as the "gestural, pictorial, sculptural, sonic, tactile, bodily, affective, and artefactual dimensions of human life" (Finnegan 206). Walter J. Ong also contends that "reading a text oralizes it" (175) and if this is so, the question is: what does the oral performance of written poetry do? Osundare expresses this this way: "in Yoruba, poetry is song and chant, a performed or performable event throbbing with human breath, with a robust sense of audience and participation ... poetry... is song, performance; it is utterance" ("Yoruba Thought" 25). Osundare's poetry, therefore, is based on the tripod of relevance, participation, and performance, an art which creates meaning through the exploitation of the contrast between sounded expression and silence, not forgetting the ideological-epistemic ramifications of the binary of sound and silence.

Note: The above article is a revised and updated excerpt from Anyokwu, Christopher. *Tradition and Change in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare*. Ph.D. Diss. Lagos: U of Lagos, 2006. Copyright release to the author.

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