

Aesthetics of Modern African Poetry: A Study of Niyi Osundare and Oswald Mtshali

Oparebea Nelson¹, Alhassan Yakubu²

¹Department of Languages, Presbyterian Women's College of Education, Aburi Akuapem, Ghana

²Department of languages, E.P University College of Education, Bimbilla, P.O. box 16, Bimbilla, Ghana, West Africa

Abstract: This paper discusses the aesthetics of modern African poetry. It focuses every discussion on African poetry and as such, the nature and features of African poetry itself are examined, especially in the light of African poetry being "Modern". Two modern African poets from different parts of the African continent has been examined – Niyi Osundare (Nigeria, West Africa) and Oswald Mtshali(South Africa).These poets have been carefully selected for their common ideologies of writing for the oppressed and the less privileged. Again, four selected poems - two each from the named poets - which have common messages of highlighting the fear of the oppressed and giving hope to the under privileged, have been selected for study. Using the Aesthetic Theory of Linguistic Parallelism, the study does a qualitative analysis of these four poems to establish refrain as an aesthetic device in modern African poetry. The study therefore concludes that, refrain or repetition, is an effective tool used by modern African poets to put across their message and to achieve aesthetic values in their works.

Key Words: Aesthetics, African Poetry, African Art, Modern, Parallelism

I. INTRODUCTION:

Generally speaking, African literature, both pre and post independence, is, in one way or the other, a reaction to European colonization of Africa. A deeper understanding of (West) African poetry therefore cannot be achieved without taking this colonization into consideration (Boachie: 200:1). African literature, however, did not start with the coming of European to Africa, because a people's literature is an old as the people themselves. Africans had an indigenous literature before the European came to colonize the continent, and the tradition continues to thrive to this moment. The indigenous literature was (and still is) oral, because of non-literate nature of the traditional culture and society. African oral literature manifests in the following forms: folktales, folksongs, specific type of songs and chants, myths legends, epics, proverbs, riddles and tongue-twisters.

In African Literature, there is no clear-cut division of genres of narratives, poetry, and drama as in modern western literature. The African perspective constitutes the blend of all, in the sense that a good narrative involves poetic songs and chants, with the minstrel wearing a mask and a special costume and performing to the accompaniment of music supplied by drums or another musical instrument.

Modern African literature adopts many oral traditional forms and tropes. Many writers (poets, novelists and dramatists) use

indigenous folklore such as folktales, myths, legends, epics, folksongs and proverbs, among so many others. This oral/traditional literature is committed to memory and is passed by word of mouth from this generation. The reliance on memory makes this literature to continue to evolve with time. The dynamism of an oral "text" is manifested in every performance, because the elements of the oral texts such as mood of the performer and the place and time of performance themselves are not static.

As a results of its orality, therefore, Oral literature has much improvisation, and spontaneity in the performance, because each rendition is "text" of its or a variant of another. African oral literature was, and still is, integrated into the daily lives of the people. It constituted, and still constitutes, songs that men and women sang at homes or in farms, during fishing, hunting, or while traveling on lonely roads. A woman sang as she weeded her yam or cassava farm; she also sang while pounding her millet, as she lulled her baby to sleep with poetic lullabies. At the same time, a man clearing a farm, planting, or preparing palm oil in the palm oil press sang songs to revive his energy.

There is no doubt that modern African writers deploy elements from African traditional oral sources to achieve functional and aesthetic purposes in their works. Apparently, these writers seek to construct and document the distinctive African identity in the mainstream of global literary consciousness by privileging and valorising various strands of the African character or behavioural pattern, customs, belief systems, world views, values, philosophies, perceptions, ethos, emotions and mores, all of which combine to paint an authentic and unadulterated picture of the African existential landscape.

In literary cycles, the term 'Modern' can be looked at as a period from the time of African contact with the Europeans up to today. Therefore, modern African poetry can be said to have two phases – pre-colonial and post-colonial. Writing particularly about modern Ghanaian literature, but largely addressing modern African poetry, Angmor observes:

Modern Ghanaian Literature has emerged out of a Polarized society: a society whose traditions have been challenged by those of the West. Its poetry, like the other genres, is therefore characterized by sentiments to perpetuate the ideas of an indigenous culture as well as an

awareness of the literary taste and expectations of a wider word of cultures (1996: 95).

Modern African poetry, by this assertion therefore, leans heavily on the European culture, since it was the coming together of these two cultures – indigenous African culture and the European culture – that culminated in today's modern literature – poetry. The African got the insight of putting words and ideas into writing from the Europeans Education, and this European education carried with it European literature. African scholars with European education begun to express themselves poetically –this is the genesis of modern written African poetry. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his essay "Homecoming" agrees to the fact that African literature owes the European culture an incalculable debt. He writes:

Literature does grow or develop vacuum, it is giving impetus, shape, direction and even area of a concern by social, political and economic forces in a literature and other forms cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo- colonialism. Our culture (literary culture, emphasis mine) over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background.

There have been raging debates and controversies regarding language as a tool for the African writer. Many have argued that for the African writer to have written indigenous African Literature-Poetry, such should have been, or should be, in African Languages. There are some critics who believe, and define, African literature(Poetry) as an appendage of European literature and have therefore denied its (African literature) autonomy. The main justification for such attempt could be attributed to the fact that the language used in documenting or writing African literature is mainly European. Problem of language is therefore very pertinent to the definition of African literature. Chinweizu et al (1980:11-12) note in this regard that:

It seems to us quite clear that work done for African audience, by Africans, and in non-African languages, whether these works are oral or written, would be among those for which some legitimate doubt might be raised about their inclusion or exclusion.

Chinweizu, Jemie and Maduiké therefore affirm that African Literature is nothing but works done by Africans for African public and in African languages. Obi Wale (1970), cited in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1993:71), concurs with Chinweizu et al in as far as what constitute the definition of African literature is concerned. He writes.

African literature is the one written in African languages. African literature can only be written in African languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in in each of our nationalities and agencies for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism.

Further, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) cited Ngozi(2018:19), observes that language is the greatest agent of imperialism and urges African writers to revert to writing in their mother tongue to reconnect with their roots from which they are daily alienated through the continued use of foreign imperialist languages. However, Achebe (1975), has a different view regarding the definition of African literature. He observes that "African literature is a creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experience originating in Africa are integral" (p55-56).

It must be noted that Achebe cautiously omitted language in his definition. His emphasis is rather on "African setting and African experience". This study holds the view that Achebe's definition of African literature is by far the most convincing and the most comprehensive. After all, how else can the African writer communicate his thoughts for the world to understand him if not through the language that is spoken and understood by more than two billion people across the globe-English.

Furthermore, expressing the African thought and emotions in the African languages, as suggested by Wa Thiong'o and Chinweizu et al, would suffer two setbacks. First of all, there is no universal language that is spoke and understood by all Africans in all African countries, and even in the diaspora, through which the African writer could express his thoughts. Even if there was an attempt to select, "breed and nurture" such a language (which we think was, and still is, an impossibility) for purpose of satisfying the desire of African literature for the African people in the African language, yet this would have suffered a language selectional problem. In the sense that Africa is a continent with the mostly densely populated languages and dialects, and any attempt to make one language stand unique among all would not be able to answer the questions: which one? From which region? Spoken by which people? And, why that particular one?

Secondly, what will be the benefit in expressing one's thoughts, feeling and emotions in a language when the very people to whom the 'bullet is fired 'can neither read nor understand what you write?. It is better served when the one to whom the message is directed are told in the language they understand best. That is the reason English speaking African literary writers took up the fight for emancipation in English.

Many writers hold the view that, in all these discussions about African literature ,and for that matter African poetry, four our generation of African poetry have emerged. In the first generation of modern African poetry, there was an incarnation of a dominant tendency of reaction against colonialism. In this regard, Ogunyem C. Batunde(2007) in his final master's degree thesis, has touched on these four generations of African writers(poets).He writes:

Four generations of African poetry have emerged: the first generation imagine themes such as black aesthetics in America. Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesair(emphasis mine) belong to his tradition of poets. The next generation

of poet in Africa cry for independence from the grip of colonizers and racial prejudice. Wole Soyinka and Dennis Bratus have some poems in this direction. The third generation of poets use poems to establish the post-independence disillusionment and the sudden break down of law and orders in Africa. The fourth generation of Africa poets concentrate on the current contemporary problems militating against Africa. (p.4).

This study holds that Niyi Osundare and Oswald Mtshali belongs to the fourth generations of poets in Africa. It must be said, however, that African writers, regardless of which generation they belong, adopted oral techniques in their poetry, fiction, and plays. Many poems are modelled on satirical abuse songs, dirges, and praises chants. It is for this reason Abiola Irele has describe modern African literature as “a written oral literature” in fact, modern African literature has enjoyed a lot of influence from the traditional oral literature.

Apart from dividing the modern period into pre-colonial and post-colonial, many African scholars have added further classification or division. Donates Nwoga, in his *West African Verse(1967:142)* further divides the period into “Pioneer” and “Modern”. He explains that all poems that were written before 1930 would be termed “modern”. But continuous that:

Just as things change quickly in Africa in economic and political fields, so the preoccupations and attitudes of the generation rapidly acquire new directions. And so between the two generations of poets who have written within the short space of time since 1930's, there has been a difference in technique and approach in the writing of poetry that justifies the break into “pioneer” and “modern”. The early 1950's marked the change

The use of “modern” in African poetry, therefore, was as a result of developments in two areas- in technique of poetic expression” and the source of poetic material. This “new technique of poetic expression” is what really makes modern African poetry what it is, and this paper seeks to highlight these new technique in African poetry.

Regarding the source of poetic material, Angmor (1996) posits that, “a piece of literary work is a projection of its writer and its background, its society. A literary work is thus both sociological and philosophical” (p. 1). So a poet is, thus, encouraged to write from the happenings of his society and from his own philosophical orientation.

Since the 1960's, political, economic and culture events have begun to shape African poetry, and that gave the poet a lot of material to write. Poets therefore wrote about things that bother on their society or country with the aim of healing and purging them. The Ghanaian John Aidoo in his collection of poems, *This Turning face(1991)*, is an example of poets who wrote to the immediate happenings in their society. In the 1970s and 80s, there were political upheavals, economic deprivation and military take overs in Ghana. All these influenced the writings of Aidoo in all his collections.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to establish the effective use of refrain to achieve a positive end in the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Oswald Mtshali. The study seeks to establish how this aesthetic device has been used by the selected poets to make the message in the poems beautiful and attractive

Research Question

To what extent has Refrain/Repetition been used to achieve aesthetic value in the poems of Osundare and Mtshali?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study uses the library research method. Books and articles from internet sources are used by the writers in gathering the data. The data in this study are the four selected poems, ‘Let Earth’s Pain Be Soothed’, and ‘Excursion’ by Niyi Osundare; and ‘Night Fall In Soweto’ and ‘If You Should Know Me’ by Oswald Mtshali. These poems are carefully selected from these two poets from different parts of African- Niyi Osundare West Africa, Oswald Mtshali South Africa. Both poets, in their respective poems, speak for the downtrodden and also give voice of hope to the voiceless

Data analysis

The data will be analysed qualitatively. Each poem will be read carefully in order to identify the aesthetic device of refrain in them. Subsequently, we will quote portions of the poems where this device has been used to achieve the aesthetically to put across their message.

Theoretical Consideration-The Aesthetics Theory

Aestheticism has its roots in the Romantic period and the Pre-Raphaelites and spread in Western Europe and America during the late 19th century. It involves a devotion to art and the beauty of it. It denotes the importance of beauty compared with other values, as morality and material utility. Aestheticism attempts to separate art from life in order to reduce moral implications. Instead of letting attitudes towards life influence the work of art, art is valued for the immediate aesthetic pleasure it entails (Johnson 13-14).

Haugom Olsen speaks of the Aesthetic theory in his *Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice(1981)* and calls it the *Supervenience Theory*. He explains that the Supervenience-Theory accounts for aesthetic features by construing them as supervenient on textual features. Linguistically, the word ‘Supervenience’ means ‘coming or occurring as something novel, additional, or unexpected’. However, the word ‘Supervenience’ is normally associated with the study of Philosophy. Philosophically, therefore, Supervenience is a topic-neutral, dependency relation that typically holds between facts or sets of properties. For instance, to say that aesthetic properties supervene on non-aesthetic properties means that the former depend on the latter. If one painting is beautiful but another is ugly, then there must be some difference between them in how the colours and shapes are

arranged on the canvas. If the other painting is a perfect forgery, then it may lack an aesthetic property that the genuine painting has.

Literarily, therefore, Supervenience has been employed to mean paying more attention to the beauty of art work (the literary work) than the content of the work. Following this Supervenience theory, these researchers have focused their analysis more on aesthetics than linguistic- there has been attention on 'how' over 'what'. We can say, therefore, that in this study, aesthetic properties supervene on linguistic properties

Aesthetics involves the styles and techniques employed by writers to make a beautiful work of art that is meant to excite. The aesthetics theory holds the view that art should be perceived for its entertainment purpose and not for instruction that is "art for art's sake" (Pater 1967). Leech and Short (1981) perceive stylistics as an interface between linguistics and literary criticism. In their view, stylistics presents literary text as its object and uses linguistics as a means to an end. An aesthetic feature, the theory says, is identified by a reader, in a literary work, through an aesthetic judgement as what one may call a constellation of textual features. A constellation of textual features constitutes an aesthetic feature of a particular work. It is not identified with reference to content, but style.

There are a number of aesthetic theories (refer to Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; 1997) —Formalism, Voluntarism, Emotionalism, Intellectualism, Intuitionism, Organicism, and Parallelism (an aspect of Formalism). This study relies on the latter for its analysis-Parallelism. Linguistic parallelism refers to the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect. (Yankson, 1987). He identifies parallelism at three different levels of linguistic organization: phonological level, semantic level and the syntactic level. This study again proceeds from the syntactic level of parallelism- Refrain. The aesthetics of the two poets can be derived from their style employed in putting across their message telling the story.

Aesthetic of Modern African Poets

The MacMillan English Dictionary defines aesthetic as: "the set of principles on which artist's work is based. It is the study of the nature of beauty, especially in art (such as poetry, emphasis, mine). In poetry, aesthetics can simply be put as: "how poets say what they say". What they say is the content, and how they say it involves the various style and techniques they employ to put across their message. The totality of all the strategies, style and techniques a poet employs leads to the beauty of his/her work –Aesthetics.

Emmanuel Ngara defines aesthetics as "the literary convention and stylistic stance adopted by the writer" (1990, 12). He admits that there are "several layers" of aesthetics ideology and identifies repetition and parallelism as well as the paralinguistic effective devices of myth, allusion and irony as enabling poetic aesthetics. He makes strongest case for Africa literary aesthetics as follow:

In the process of reading, the reader and the text also enter into a dialectical relationship. There is no one-sided cause and effect relationship. The text bears itself to the reader, exposes its multiple layers of meaning and aesthetic effects, and the reader responds by not only receiving what the text offers, but also by injecting into it some of his or her perceptiveness, ideological insights and sensibility. The reader and the text enter a relationship similar to that of a man and a woman making love (ibid, p. 16-17).

That means that the poet writes what he writes, but the reader does not only read what the poet writes, but also how he (the poet) writes. It is more of how the poet writes, then what he writes, that generates the "man and woman" relationship between the reader and the text Ngara speak about. After all,

By Her beauty man can fall in love; AND By its beauty The reader can fall in love

Furthermore, writing on the aesthetic of African poetry, Ojaide observes that Modern African poetry have aesthetics which are unique in possessing repository of authentic African features. This authenticity manifests itself in the use of images derived from the fauna and flora, proverbs, indigenous rhythms, verbal tropes, to establish a poetic form (1996:30).

One major feature of modern African poetry is the poet's use of language -the aesthetics of language. Unlike the Elizabethan poets who wrote in an elevated and florid style, and who were "ransacking" nature and classical mythology for decorative embellishments, and who wrote in a language that was far above the common man, the modern African poet writes in the language of the people. Osundare defines the nature of modern African poetry in terms of its language in his "Poetry Is" as follows;

Poetry is not the esoteric whisper...
not a learned quiz...
not the eloquence of the gong
no oracle's kernel poetry is man
meaning to man (1983, p. 3)

William Wordsworth had earlier expressed a similar concern about how simple and "down to earth" the language of the modern poet should be. He writes: "The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passion of men. How then, can his language differ from that of all men who feel vividly and see clearly" (cited in Yankson (2011), p.1). Rai (1975) seems to be the most vociferous in addressing the issue of language of not only the modern European poet, but also the modern African poet. He observes that:

The suggestive power of language has carried to an extreme limit, and irony, paradox, pun, ambiguity, juxtaposition of diverse and contrary words and images have become part of poetry of our complex age Compression of language in the interest of economy is another marked feature of the modern poetic style (p.28).

Rai argues further that the distortion of language is a rule rather than exception, and that grammar, syntax and punctuation have all lost their sanctity in modern poetry. Nwoga on the other hand stretched the issue beyond just language to even the structure of modern African poetry. He asserts that;

Regular lines and rhymes have completely been rejected in favour of other forms internal music of words. Syntax were distorted where such distortion was thought to be necessary to give the poet greater scope to create greater force. The diction became less poetic and less universal as the poet now felt free to use words with his own connotations. (1967, p.143).

Language is a social element which the poet has to handle with the view of reaching out to his audience. For this reason, the modern African poet would write with less regularity in line, length and rhymes. Another aesthetic feature in modern poetry is the idea of experimentation, which has led to the poet trying to incorporate materials from their society and environment in their poetry. Even the materials which form the inspiration for poetry have also changed – they have gone modern. Poets have departed from the obsessive public themes of colour, colonization and independence, and would now concern themselves with the happenings of current (modern) society. Niyi Osundare, for instance, has his concern in the general suffering of the common man, the lousy living of people in the “high” class and the destruction of nature. Nwoga consents to this view when he writes

Modern poets have left the public for private domain. They speak of life and death, of joy and pain, they write of this experiences and their growth in life, of their loves and hates. It is clear that, although the poets are thinking of themselves when they are writing these poems, their poems are also meaningful for us – for we go through the same, or similar, experience. They therefore enlarge our sympathies and emotional and mental growth and help us to adjust to comparable situations when they arise in our own lives. (p. 145).

It is in the light of these aesthetics of modern African poetry that the selected poems of Niyi Osundare and Oswald Mtshali would be looked at as a Modern African Poets.

Refrain As Aesthetic value in The Poems of Niyi Osundare

He is a Nigerian poet whose poetry is generally devoted to serve the exploited African peasantry. His works vividly convey his concept on the relationship between the oppressed Nigerians/Africans and the crop of leaders there. His works address a deluge of themes which include corruption, poverty and administrative mismanagement. In the introduction to his collection “Song of the Market place”, one Biodum Jeyifo remarked.

... Osundare’s volumes (are) sometimes humorous, often searing, occasionally bitter and satirical, but always vivid

and metaphorically arresting evocations of episodes from our recent history and the upheavals, triumphs and defeats of struggle Nigeria and other lands. You will encounter celebrations of defenders of the oppressed and the scourge and terror of the oppressors. (p. xiii)

It is this kind of solidarity with the oppressed, downtrodden, the disposed, and in a corresponding faith on their aspiration and will to revolutionary change, that defines Osundare’s ideology in poetry – the Marxist ideology. Because Marxist ideology (named after a German philosopher, Karl Marx) is the type of criticism in which literary artists (writers) emphasize the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate social order. To Osundare, the dispossession of majority of people in society, and more specifically of the rural producers may in fact be said to be the grand theme of his poetry. Regarding his style, Jeyifo (ibid) snaps:

“His lines reveal a lucid, witty lyricism sharply etched imagery, earthly, often deliberately raucous turns of phrases, closeness to the people, to the earth, closeness to nature (p. xii).

Aesthetic in Osundare’s poetry would be highlighted using two of his poems – “Let Earth’s pain be soothed”, and “Excursion”. In both poems, the devices used are variously structural, syntactical, rhythmical and repetitive. In the 7th stanza of “Let Earth’s Pain Be Soothed”, the structure is beautifully arranged as follows:

Let it rain to today that parched throats may sing...
 Let it rain that earth may heal her silence...
 Let it rain today that corn leaves may clothe the hill
 Let it rain that root may swell the womb of laying
 Let it rain today that stomach may shine the rumble of thunder
 Let it rain that children may bath and bowl and brawl
 And in the 6th stanza, the phrase “dust in” is beautifully, repeatedly, yet deliberately arranged.
 Dust in eating halls
 Dust in busy bedrooms
 Dust in scheming boardrooms
 Dust in retrenching factories
 Dust in power brothels

This repetition is rhythmical in the sense that by “chanting” “Let it rain... Let it rain ...

Let it rain; is almost like you are singing, and that is the beauty of Osundare’s poetry.

Regarding “Excursion”, the word “past” is repeated 16 times in four stanzas, averagely four times in a stanza

Pastbush paths...
 Past rocky out crops
 past dandelions roaring
 Past elephant grass...
 Past the depleted...

Past the leafy...
 past the groundnut...
 Past the bean...
 Past the gallant...
 past the bee...
 past the dung-beetle...
 past soldier...
 Past the lake...
 past the duck...
 past boulders...
 past the quivering...

This is how beautiful, well thought-out and carefully scripted Osundare's poems are!

Refrain As Aesthetic value in The Poems of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali

Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali is a South African poet, who was born in Vryheid, Natal. He was a personal victim to the endemic workings of the Apartheid era. He lived in Soweto where he wrote almost all his poems. Philosophically, we see Mtshali as a poet preaching hope and optimism. In the following five lines from "If you should know me" Mtshali sets out his poetic manifesto, defining his personality and sense of direction – his mind set, orientation or philosophy.

Look upon me as a pullet crawling from an eggshell laid by a Zulu hen ready to fly in spirit to all lands on earth.

From a humble beginning, and with great impediments, he hopes to "fly to all lands on earth."

Similarly, the first four lines and the last three lines of "The shepherd and His Flock", the same sentiments is captured.

The rays of the sun

are like a pair of scissors cutting the blanket of dawn from the sky...

O! Wise sun above will you ever guide me into school?

And in "Boy on a swing" the small boy asks series of questions with strong determination in his voice.

Where did I come from?
 When will I wear long trousers?
 Why was my father jailed?

Regarding his style, Nadine Gordimer, in a foreword to *Sound of a Cowhide drum*, describes Mtshali poems as "balladic, lyrical, and unerringly chosen according to the demands of the subject".

Let me say that two of Mtshali's poems – "Night Fall In Soweto" and "If You Should know Me" – shall be considered in lighting the aesthetics of his poetry.

Regarding, "Night Fall in Soweto", his graphic and patristic description of events is so obvious. In the following lines, Mtshali describes, rather poignantly, the cold murder of the blacks in Soweto;

A murder's hand, lurking in the shadows, strikes
 down the helpless, victim

Again, in the line "open up!" he barks like a rabid dog. (Line 30) we see a "loud" description of the situation. And by loud description, we mean the reader can "hear" the shout in the poem.

Finally, there is the use of refrain in:

Man has ceased to be man
 Man has become beast
 Man has become prey

More so, the repetitiveness of "Night Fall!!!" shows how dreadful the night in Soweto was. In his "If You Should Know Me" (The same lines as referred to in page 16), the colloquial tone, the ironic humour, the shackle of vivid concrete imagery is where the aesthetics lies.

III. CONCLUSION

The new popularity of poetry in modern African poetry seems to have arisen from the aptness of poetry as a succinct verbal art form in expressing feelings and attitudes. This expression of feelings is done within the purview of the poets' "Africaness", not, as Aiyejina (1988) puts it, "far-fetched Graeco-Roman, as well as Judo-Christian myths filled with undue Eurocentric's derivation and obscurantisms". All these the poets do with new styles and techniques – aesthetics. The above assertion has been highlighted with four poems, two each, from the Nigerian Niyi Osundare and the South African Oswald Mtshali. The study has demonstrated that modern African poets constantly convey their message with aesthetics in mind. It is these aesthetics that, like flies to rotten meat, attract their readers and audience to their messages. To this end, the Aesthetics of modern African poetry has been examined.

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