

The autism and the music: an encounter that often succeeds (1)

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Abstract

The interest of autistic children in music was traced very early and their musical skills as well. Why is the meeting between the autistic child and music possible when the one with the word is so difficult? The hypothesis we support on the occasion of this article is that music would allow autistic children to experience the address without having to experience the painful dimension of the assignment that is linked to the act of speech. Music would allow, as demonstrated by the example of the composer Antoine Ouellette, the autistic person to put into shape a chaotic world without having to go through the word.

Key words: address, autism, music, psychoanalysis, invoking pulsion

Music: an address without assignation

The interest for music and songs by the autistic children was early noticed, as well as their musical competences. Why the encounter between autistic child and music seems to be possible when that with the speech is so difficult? We would like, with this article, to try to bring an element of answer to this question.

The clinicians who practice with autistic patients have recognized a long time ago their appetite for music. The neurologist Oliver Sacks reports in *An Anthropologist on Mars* the astonishing musical gifts of the young Stephen and how he seems to “know” the construction of the chords without ever having learned it (2). He illustrates, thus, without knowing it, this hooking to the structural and predicible dimension of music: in this case, the mathematical cycle of the construction of the chords. The question here is about a point of contact between autism and music: the code, which we know how it can raise interest in the autistic.

But music cannot be reduced to the code. It also possesses the extreme interest of proposing a saying without saying it (3). Which Stravinsky would have summed up in the following sentence: “Music does not say anything but it says it well”. When we listen to music we are confronted with a discourse – indeed, we talk about the musical discourse – without signification. It could be objected to us that there are some program music in which the music “tells” a story; but have we ever seen a listener identify “the goatherd asleep by the soft murmur of the leafage and the grasses, having his loyal dog to his feet, in the flowered and tender meadow” when listening to the *largo* of the concerto *La Primavera* (4) of Vivaldi? Music does not tell a story, eventually, it illustrates it. The neurotic, occasionally, can tell him/herself a story while listening to music, but this is not what the autistic person hears. His/her

musical listening opens to us a new dimension. In addition to this, it is important to distinguish here the reception of music made by the neurotic, the psychotic and the autistic.

The neurotic enjoys (5) music through his/her *phantasm* (6), which gives it very quickly a nostalgic hue. Music promptly becomes to him/her the echo of a lost object (7). This imaginary relation to music was particularly approached by certain of our post-Freudian colleagues who believed they could read it as a possibility to find again, by its intermediary, the first lost object, which, in fact, it is just a remote deafened echo. Therefore, Marie-France Castarède affirms, with a delicious optimism, that “in every music, the most sophisticated as it can be, there is always a recomposed ritornello, a forgotten refrain, a melody that resurges in order to translate with the notes the nuanced game of our emotions and first dialogues with our environment (8)” and, as a consequence, music “constitutes itself as the possible re-encounter with the lost object of love (9)”. This comprehension of the musical fact conducts Marie-France Castarède to conceive the singing lesson as “an attempt [to] resuscitate [this primordial and ineffable communion], because it is a substitute situation of the pre-language relation between the child and the mother (10)”. Marie-France Castarède also presents us an idealized face of the voice, this time in the context of the choral practice: “The choirmaster is (...) a father figure who, instead of separating the child from the mother through the *phantasm*, brings it back as a happy and fulfilled alliance (11)”. The choir would be, thus, some sort of ideal family “precisely because the conflicts are evacuated: the generational difference is abolished in the name of a desire of fusion with the all-powerful maternal object and the sexual difference is denied regarding its symbolic castration dimension (12)”. We will not insist. We are clearly here in the side of an idealized vision of the voice and of music that leads to a comprehension of the musical fact as appeasement, which it is far from being the only case. The passion of the lyricomaniac, studied by Michel Poizat, demonstrates it quite enough; the “adored” voice is as much a source of pleasure as of *jouissance*. The amateur does not have this strange experience at the opera in the most intense moments when he/she closes the eyes to become all ears and to feel the tears flow without being able to explain why? Pain and pleasure sign the presence of an issue of *jouissance*. The opera, and music most generally, are social spaces to the neurotic where the object voice is, in the same movement, evoked and revoked in order to be able to be enjoyed (13). The singing is what allows him/her to lay down arms, to pacify them.

As for the psychotic, listening to music can also be a voice trap. It is what Jacques-Alain Miller reveals when he affirms:

If we talk as much, if we do our conferences, if we chat, if we sing, and if we listen to the singers, if we make music and if we listen to it (...) it is to keep quiet what deserves to be called the voice as object *a* (14).

In this sense, the psychotic would find in the voice coming from the transistor or from the musical instrument (15) a lieu-tenant (16) to his/her own voices.

Finally, the autistic would have a very different experience from those described above: neither (r)evocation of the lost object nor defense against the invasion from a voice trap, the autistic would have, through music, the important experience to be addressed without being assigned.

It is, without any doubt, the big difference – not very often commented – between music and speech. When a word is addressed to me, it obligatorily assigns me and immediately poses the question of the desires that subtends it: “He says this but is it really what he thinks? He says that but why does he says that to me?”. As Daniel Roy (17) indicates, the neurotic demand channels unfold themselves in the misunderstanding of the speech; the object is lost there and resurges as an object that causes the desire. The famous Jewish story reported by Freud in *Wit and its Relation to Unconscious* illustrates it perfectly.

Two Jews meet each other in the railway car of a train station in Galicia. “Where are you going?”, one asks. Answer: “To Krakow”. “See what a liar you are”, the other gets excited. “If you say you are going to Krakow, then you want me to believe that you are going to Lemberg. But I know now that you are really going to Krakow. So why are you lying? (18)”.

This story shows, in a comic mode, that every word and speech addressed to the other triggers an interrogation that can very quickly be tinted with a paranoiac dimension. This is an effect of what we call assignation: in everyday life, the speech assigns in a more or less authoritarian way according to the desire that supports it. From the interrogative to an injunctive form, the interlocutor becomes more and more present and leaves less and less place to whom the speech is addressed. However, “the autistic child does not give his/her consent to the initiative of the other, he/she does not give away to the misunderstandings of the demand. These channels are closed (19)”. Also, to him/her, the manifestation of the desire of the Other takes a connotation of annihilation.

There is nothing like this in music: if it is addressed to us – and are we not persuaded that it speaks to us? –, it does not assigns us. That is what Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his way, had already formulated:

Without any doubt, music speaks as well; but this can only be because of its negative relation to the language and because, by separating from it, music has conserved the hollow imprint of its formal structure and of its semiotic function: music can not exist without language that preexists it and from which it still depends on, we could say, in a privative belonging. *Music is language minus sense* (20); therefore, we can understand that the listener,

who is first and foremost a speaking subject, feels irresistibly compelled to supplement this absent sense, like the amputee attributing to the disappeared member the sensations that he/she experiences and that have their seat in the sump (21)”.

Music, language minus sense, which the neurotic will try as much as possible to reinstall, would keep a link with the speech, but in a hollow way. It is this lack of sense that would allow the autistic to be attached to music (a voice without sense that is not, however, insane) when the relation to the enunciation (a voice carrying the desire of the Other), of his/her own or one that comes from somebody else, is so difficult to conceive.

The encounter with music would allow the autistic to experience a non-traumatic encounter with a sonority that makes it listenable as an address disconnected from any demand or assignation, which authorizes him/her to occupy a place in the concert of the world. There where only hustle and bustle existed, music would make listenable a sound construction that the autistic would be able to decode in order to find a way, a voice (22). *Fiat vox!*, we could say. If the word kills the thing, music would be its celebration. Here, we need to hear this as the celebration of the murder of the thing, allowing with this act an evocation and revocation of this primordial Thing, which the subject must hold to without, however, following there. As for the autistic, we could affirm that music, finding its source in the place of the Thing, would offer it a structuration. The life story of Antoine Ouellette and his experience with music will allow us to clinically clarify our propositions.

(To make yourself) a musical signature

Diagnosed as an Asperger autistic at the age of 47, Antoine Ouellette is a recognized composer who witnesses the way that his particular interests have allowed him to operate a treatment of the *jouissance* and construct a rapport with the world, certainly singular, where he can make his voice heard. The bird songs play a central role there. This Canadian musicologist and biologist has transformed this passion into a *symphonic contemplation* “inspired by the birds songs from Quebec (23)”, of which *Joie de Grives* is one of the major music pieces.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5xdKCrqb4>

From the crazy carousel of ideas to its musical formatting

Very early, music was an irresistible attraction for Antoine Ouellette. Listening to *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (24) was a very particularly encounter: “It was my first true contact with classical music. This music fascinates me even if, sometimes, it scares me. But I loved it even until this fright (25)”.

Carried away beyond pleasure, Antoine Ouellette listens and re-listens tirelessly to the same music without any possible interruption. “I am entirely in the act of listening at the present moment (26)”. Time and space are, then, suspended, imprisoning him in a universe where nothing is lacking. Palilalia becomes, thus, the symptom of a frantic *jouissance*, a petrified *jouissance*, par excellence: “The ideas, musicals or any others, can turn around in my head until I get physically tired, just like in a crazy carousel (27)”.

This effect is produced by instrumental musical that does not have neither words or pronounced rhythms: “No words, no stories: no verbal obstacles to music. Joy! (28)”. For this composer, the words are a parasite, they “interfere (29)” in this “musical hearing (30)”. In search of continuity, Antoine Ouellette keeps his distance from any cutting. Language and music are the heart of his PhD thesis, which he consecrates to the study of birds songs. He catalogues them according to their social function: a song to affirm the territory, a song to work, another to sound an alert etc.; language is taken at the level of the sign. An attempt to lift the opacity of the language, which constitutes for the autistic a rustle, the *noise of the language* (31), and makes the social bond impenetrable. Therefore, Antoine Ouellette says he lives in “Absurdistan (32)”, a world where the speech “slides [from him] (33)”, a world that has lost the reason. “Everybody is delirious, except the autistics (34)”.

A particular bird song concentrates the attention of Antoine Ouellette. This song does not precede any social function; it is “a disinterested music, without any search of power, prestige, professional gain, recognition (35)”. This song would be produced, according to Antoine Ouellette: “For the pleasure or the irresistible need of creating (36)”. It is this same need that drove him to become a composer.

Fractal music renewing the relation to chaos

For Antoine Ouellette, “creating music was an answer to violence (37)”. The violence in question is to be understood as violence of the language. The autistic, as we know, is plagued by the object voice, as it is “what carries the presence of the subject in his/her saying (38)”, and a treatment must be operated on it. Having as a support the two centers of interest that he manifested since his childhood – music and birds songs –, Antoine Ouellette will effectuate a true *Affinity Therapy* (39) in order to find a possible relation to the world.

He explains the reason for his iterative musical listening: “If I listened to music so attentively, it was to understand how it was constructed in order to be able, in my turn, to compose it (40)”. He finds, then, two major difficulties in his work as a composer: on one hand, his “interest in small details (41)”, and on the other hand, the cuttings present between each note in an instrument, such as the piano, which prevent him to have access to the plenitude he searched.

Antoine Ouellette would, then, write very unique compositions, which do not respect a strict rhythmic framework. His music is a transcription of what he has in his head: “the birds songs have slipped up in my music, sometimes in a stylized way [...], sometimes in a realistic way (42)”. This musical writing will transform his Palilalia into a solution. The first moment of creation – *contemplation* – consists in “tireless playing this idea [the one that is repeated in his head] by stepping on the strong pedal (43)”. Then, he lets the idea inflects itself into all sort of variations. “I repeat again and again and for a long time the variations that please me. I write down that idea and its variations (44)”. The spaces are, hence, introduced in the *crazy carousel* that, until then, had aspirated him.

The work that is being written allows him to pass from chaos to harmony. Indeed, Antoine Ouellette considers the autism not as a troubling development but mainly as a *chaotic type development*: “I am not referring here to a simple disorder, even less to disorganization, but rather to the *physics of the chaos* and the mathematical fractals (45)”. If the evolution of the chaotic system is impermissible, the fact remains that it sets out for a balance based on repetition and reiteration mechanisms present in fractal mathematics *via* an attractor called *Lorenz attractor* or, yet, *strange attractor*. Antoine Ouellette proposes, then, the following analogy: “it [the stranger attractor] looks astonishingly like the particular interests of the autistic, which are also *attractors* often *strange* (46)”. From then on, the affinity of the autistic has the function of organizing a balance in the chaos of the world of the Other.

That is how, in his work, Antoine Ouellette tries to transform echo behaviors and words into music off all kinds of forms: “I love to make a thousand vibrations resonate with few sounds. Still, I realized that the note E, when repeated, is charged with anguish, like an anxious bell (47)”. A multitude of variations around an element that is repeated. We have here the magnificent demonstration of a treatment of the *jouissance*. While Palilalia infinitely reiterates an element marked by an excess *jouissance*, Antoine Ouellette brings this element One in effects of the resonance and constructs, thus, a *jouissance* trap. As Jean-Claude Maleval observes, “music estheticizes the obscene *jouissance* of the voice (48)”. Thus, in the work of Antoine Ouellette, from chaos to balance, a harmony emerges from his work:

I have noticed the marked presence of a precise harmony in my compositions. It is a chord that superposes the Major [...] and the Minor [...]. This harmony can be perfectly balanced, tranquil, floating in weightlessness: the dissociative forces (Major and Minor) are harmonized. Otherwise, it is charged of tension and creates insistent dissonances: the dissociative forces are exerted; the internal balance is threatened or broken. [...] My music indicates to me that this harmonization is never entirely acquired (49).

This harmony, Antoine Ouellette qualifies it as “melodies in echo (50)”, which constitute his “sound signature (51)”. His musical work, in weightlessness, outside the terrestrial field, is mainly outside the field of the Other. Moreover, when his compositions begin to be interpreted, it is not the reception of the public that matters to him, but the “confrontation [...] to the physical and acoustic reality of music (52)”. Unlike Joyce (53), Antoine Ouellette does not want to make himself a name but he searches rather a *sound signature*, which is, itself, a treatment of the rustling of the language by the musical writing, a particular register of the letter. The work of Antoine Ouellette is not inscribed in the field of the Other but in the field of a “One all alone (54)”, plagued by *lalangue* (55). What a “funny bird (56)”! This *syntagma*, which he garbs himself, it would not come to name his absolute singularity that is lodged in his sound signature? *Funny bird*, a symptomatic signature. A signature that would “scratch” the “almost nothing” of the primordial lost and that would, therefore, hook the autistic person in the world.

Music above every Thing

The autistic people, seeking to avoid all confrontation with the presence of the subject – of their own or the one of the others –, cannot stand to be called. For this reason, it is extremely important to be attentive of the way we address ourselves to them. All clinicians who have practiced with autistics had the opportunity to notice how important it is to lighten their presence and diffract the question of the address. We are confronted here with a *bricolage* (57), in the sense this term had in 1611: “play using the border”, like in billiards. The analytical maneuver implies not putting a direct link for the enunciation place with the address, a condition that makes it possible to establish a contact with the autistic person. The ricochet, then constituted, is a way of creating an address that does not assign to.

In fact, the assignation gushes out from the voice a dimension that no one can escape and that reveals itself unbearable for the autistic. We propose to index this dimension from the timbre, which we understand as a name of the Real of the voice: the timbre is what, in the sound field, manifests the articulation between the subject and the body (58). And it is exactly to cope with this weight of the subject, which emerges in every enunciation, that the autistic puts strategies in place.

No prefabricated solution is conceivable in autism. Only one orientation becomes inevitable, the customized one, by putting ourselves in the act of listening what they have, each one, to say. To do this, it is indispensable to rely on what is presented as symptomatic. In effect, if a symptom is what makes suffer, it possess a connection to the Real from which one can create, in the way of a *bricolage*, a *savoir-faire* with the *jouissance*. As we have shown in the example of Antoine Ouellette, strategies can make a symptom extremely complex, the Palilalia in his case, in order to give place to a work (59). Certainly, not every treatment of autistic people will lead to the

production of a work. This outlet cannot constitute an ideal but, instead, putting it as a vanish point allows us to apprehend with greatest seriousness the productions that emerge during the sessions. To suppose a creator in the autistic (60) is to give importance to the question of the style, in other words, of his/her relation to the Real. A style that can, at the same time, make him/her singular and similar to others. It is to authorize the autistic, *in fine*, to create, through a *bricolage*, a signature so a possibility of being in the world can arise from his/her absolute singularity. This singularity does not make him/her less strange and foreign in the eyes of the other, but allows him/her a place where the “Is it?”, a crucial question to the autistic, can find where to lodge in and be.

Notes

1. This article develops one of the thesis exposed in our publication: Isabelle Orrado, Jean-Michel Vives, *Autisme et médiation. Bricoler une solution pour chacun*, Paris, Arkhê, 2020.
2. Olivier Sacks, *Un anthropologue sur Mars*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, p. 336-345.
3. Translation note: We would like to point out to the readers the wordplay made by the authors of the article between the words “*dire*” (a saying) and “*dit*” (something that was said and that is, thus, referred to the speech, to the words or to an statement).
4. Translation note: *The Spring*, one of the sections from *The Four Seasons*, composed by Antonio Vivaldi about 1720.
5. Translation note: The word used here by the authors, “*jouit*”, makes a directly reference to the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*, which can be related to the Freudian concept of the death drive. Freud localizes a drive beyond the pleasure principle. As a consequence, the dichotomy between sexual drives and ego drives, as conceptualized in 1914, is substituted in 1920 by the dichotomy between life drive (which unites the sexual and ego drives) and death drive (a tendency to a total reduction of psychic tension). To Jacques Lacan, the *jouissance* is not only beyond the pleasure, and even the pain, but it is also beyond the representation. It exceeds the subject as well as it points to his singular connection with the Other.
6. Translation note: The term *phantasm* is used here in the Lacanian conception of *fantasme*, also written in French as *phantasme*. In the Freudian theory, the fantasy (*die Phantasie*, which Lacan has preferred to translate as *fantasme*) is referred to an unconscious and production, often connected to the fulfillment of a desire. To Lacan, the *phantasm* organizes the psychic structure for the neurotic allying the Symbolic and the Imaginary to create a screen against the Real.
7. We need just to see how the rejected lover can convoke the object that abandoned him/her by the intermediary of a song or a piece of music that they have listened to together. Pleasure and pain are, so, deliciously blended. The rejected lover recognizes to cherish this suffering that is vectorized by the music, as it can be shown by the

tears that seize him/her in the moments of emotions linked to the act of listening to an elected voice revealed then as a metonymic object of the absent one.

8. Marie-France Castarède, *Les vocalises de la passion*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2002, p. 132.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

10. *Ibid.* p. 103.

11. Marie-France Castarède, « Chant individuel et chant choral », *Revue française de musicothérapie*, Volume XXVIII/1 n°1, mis en ligne le 26 janvier 2010. URL :

<http://revel.unice.fr/rmusicotherapie/index.html?id=3075>

12. Marie-France Castarède, « L'enveloppe vocale », *Psychologie clinique et projective*, 2001/1 (n° 7), p. 17-35. DOI : 10.3917/pcp.007.0017. URL:

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-psychologie-clinique-et-projective-2001-1-page-17.htm>

13. Translated note: In the original text, “*jouir*”, in the sense of the *jouissance*.

14. Jacques-Alain Miller, « Lacan et la voix », *La voix, colloque d'Ivry*, Paris, La lysimaque, 1988, p. 184.

15. This function of the lieu-tenant can also be supported by the voice of a warned interlocutor. It is astounding to realize that the hallucinated psychotic people, when they are under a clinical transfer work, hardly complain about the hallucinations when they are in a session, as if the transfer could be, in this case, a voice trap. The same observation could be done regarding the visual hallucinations, placing the analyst partner, this time, as a gaze trap.

16. Translation note: When the authors separate the word lieutenant in “lieu-tenant”, they put in evidence the dimension of a “place”, “*lieu*”, which can contain, “*tenir*”, the subject.

17. Daniel Roy, « Quelque chose à leur dire », *Quarto*, n°108, Septembre 2014, p. 24.

18. Sigmund Freud, « Le trait d'esprit et sa relation à l'inconscient », dans *Œuvres Complètes, volume VII*, Paris, PUF, 2014, p. 135.

19. Daniel Roy, « Quelque chose à leur dire », *Quarto*, ouvrage cité, p. 24.

20. Our emphasis.

21. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'homme nu*, Paris, Plon, 1971, p. 578-579.

22. Translation note: The authors approach here the French homonyms “*voix*” (voice) and “*voie*” (way, path, or, as a preposition, “*via*” – phonetically closer to the French word used in the original text). Which means that it is by finding a voice that the autistic may find a way to becoming.

23. Antoine Ouellette, *Pulsations. Petite histoire du beat*, Québec, Varia, 2017, p. 224.

24. Translation note: *The Child and the Spells: A Lyric Fantasy in Two Parts*, composed from 1917 to 1925 by Maurice Ravel.

25. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste. Vivre et composer avec le syndrome d'Asperger*, Montréal, Triptyque, 2011, p. 49.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Éric Laurent, *La bataille de l'autisme. De la clinique à la politique*, Paris, Navarin, 2012, p. 91.
32. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste*, ouvrage cité, p. 259.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
34. Marie-Hélène Brousse, « Commentaires », *Rivages*, Bulletin de l'ACF-ECA, n°25, octobre 2018, p. 92.
35. Antoine Ouellette, *Le chant des oyseaulx. Comment la musique des oiseaux devient musique humaine*, Montréal, Triptyque, 2008, p. 55
36. *Ibid.*
37. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste*, ouvrage cité, p. 113.
38. Jean-Claude Maleval, *L'autiste et sa voix*, Paris, Seuil, 2009, p. 78.
39. Ron Suskind, *Une vie animée. Le destin inouï d'un enfant autiste*, Paris, Édition Saint-Simon, 2017.
40. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste*, ouvrage cité, p. 119.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
42. Antoine Ouellette, *Le chant des oyseaulx*, ouvrage cité, p. 11.
43. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste*, ouvrage cité, p. 296.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
48. Jean-Claude Maleval, *L'autiste et sa voix*, ouvrage cité, p. 246.
49. Antoine Ouellette, *Musique autiste*, ouvrage cité, p. 299.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
53. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XXIII, Le sinthome*, Paris, Seuil, 2005.
54. Jacques-Alain Miller, « L'orientation lacanienne. L'Un tout seul », enseignement prononcé dans le cadre du département de psychanalyse de l'université Paris VIII, 2010-2011, inédit.
55. Translation note: The French neologism *lalangue* was created by Jacques Lacan in 1971 during a conference in the Chapel of the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris by the fusion of the words “*la*” (the) and “*langue*” (language). *Lalangue* indicates the aspect out of sense (“*hors sens*”) of the language, linked to the *jouissance*, to the letter and to the voice object. Lacan often calls it maternal *lalangue*, referring it to the transmission of the language made by the maternal voice (and it is important here to understand the mother as a psychic function), which invokes the *infans* (the one who can not talk yet) to become a subject.
56. Antoine Ouellette, *Le chant des oyseaulx*, ouvrage cité, p. 10.

57. Translation note: In the Lacanian theory, the word “*bricolage*” is referred to the act of inventing something new from the symptom of the subject and with pieces of the Real. We can use this term as a noun or as a verb, “*bricoler*”. It is important to notice that, in French, these two words are frequently used in daily life to describe the act or the ensemble of small domestic manual works or activities.

58. Jean-Michel Vives, *La voix sur le divan, Musique sacrée, opéra, techno*, Paris, Aubier, 2012.

59. Translation note: Here, the word “work” is used in the sense of an *oeuvre*, an artistic, manufactured or intellectual production, the result of a human action.

60. Concerning this theme, we invite the readers to read the collective work established by the direction of Gwénola Druel, *L'autiste Créateur. Inventions singulières et lien social*, Rennes, PUR, 2013.

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