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**TRAVELLING NATIONS, TRAVELLING CULTURES:
ELIZABETH BISHOP AND ROBERT LOWELL AS
LIMINAL TOURISTS**

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Abstract: *This paper examines two American poets and raises the question of how their texts open “innovative sites of collaboration and contestation”, to quote from an early Bhabha essay. I will interrogate how each created a representation of a “traveling culture” in their work, and how the liminal spaces created in that writing are affecting their narratives of selfhood and their conceptions of nationality. Zygmunt Bauman’s concepts of liquid modernities will help us assess the transnational narratives pursued by each poet. The two major American poets Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell were friends for much of their careers, and both were equally widely traveled. As poets and thinkers, they shared many concerns, however. When it comes to representations of non-Western countries, their paths diverged. In Robert Lowell’s work, we find the eye of the insider, the studiously trained observations of a scion from a wealthy, famous family. Lowell himself is almost transformed into a tourist by proxy, without displaying an awareness of the fact. The narratives of a nation and of the wounded national come up against liminal space. Bishop’s work on the other hand is highly aware of the tensions of transatlanticism in her deliberations on colonial narratives. In her poems “Arrival at Santos” and “In the Waiting Room”, Bishop displays a heightened awareness of how the boundaries of her self and the global travels of classic and modern colonial endeavors blend with each other*

In this paper I want to address the travel writing of two major American poets, although not all of it is travel writing as we usually frame it. The two poets are Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, whose travels include physical, “regular” travel, as well as “cultural travel” as described by James Clifford. In my paper I call both of these writers ‘liminal tourists’, because even though they, at various points in their lives were actual tourists, they have produced work that describes a very specific kind of encounter that creates a presence that is not quite tourism, not quite nomadism, but does follow the beaten paths of travelers and travel-writers. I will contextualize their travels, work and the terms I am using. What I am finding is that when we examine American narratives of the self, that we cannot separate them from discourses of empire and from the vicissitudes of travel.

It seems important, first of all, to explicate in what sense I am using the term “tourist.” Even Zygmunt Bauman, foundational figure of what is generally referred

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to as “Tourist Studies,” when interviewed, takes pains to immediately clarify the object of discussion: “I would like to separate tourism as a metaphor for contemporary living from the tourism as a body of specific persons” (Franklin 206). Yet even for Bauman, the two terms inform each other. From the state of contemporary tourism, he derives his ideas about “‘tourism’ as [a] metaphor[] of contemporary life” (207). Other examples abound¹. In a 1983 interview, playwright, poet and theorist Heiner Müller defined tourism as the view down onto the misery of the world from the height of western achievements and successes (Müller 272). This expression is both implicitly critical of actual tourism, and it is meant as a systematic diagnosis of a relationship between people living in some countries and people living in other, less obviously fortunate countries. Müller describes that gaze as a peep show. Again, the gaze of the actual tourist is implicated as well as the general attitude of media in (West²) Germany and the US.

In his essay “From Pilgrim to Tourist”, Bauman outlines what he sees as the major break between modernism and postmodernism. Of course, there are various attempts in Bauman's work to delineate that difference with varying degrees of exactitude, but in the trope of the pilgrim and the tourist, Bauman has found metaphors that can be useful in comparing the grand tour of British imperialism, with the postwar travels of America's intellectual elite. This is because Bauman's terms work on two levels: they describe both the traveler as well as the way his travels organize and change the world around him. For Bauman, the pilgrim is the modern human looking for himself in the vastness of the world around him. The modern pilgrim does not even need to go on an actual pilgrimage: modern pilgrims “invented the way of embarking on pilgrimage without leaving home” (21). Pilgrimage is not a choice, “we are pilgrims whatever we do” (20). In order to mold the world for the needs of the modern western pilgrims, the world was made “solid” (18f). I maintain that this solidity is the same as the epistemological maps described by other scholars: they are a way of powerfully structuring and ordering the world.

However, in the history of modernity as related by Bauman, this created its own problems, as the world soon ran out of savageness, out of unordered, foreign places and this, in turn, resulted in “the fragmentation of time into episodes” so that “time is no longer a river but a collection of ponds and pools” (25). Bauman posits that as the pilgrim lost importance in a world with no fixed paths to follow, four new types of travelers evolved, one of which is the tourist. Like the pilgrim, the tourist has a home, but this “home” is “not even imaginary, but postulated; what is postulated is having a home, not a particular building, street, landscape etc.” (30). The tourist may have a yearning for home, as it is expressed in homesickness, but Bauman adroitly adds that there is also “the fear of home-boundedness, of being tied

¹ Maybe a contrast helps clarify this tension. In Mireille Rosello's short but brilliant study *Postcolonial Hospitality*, she offers her readers a complex view of immigration into the west, i.e. the opposite kind of movement to tourism as described by Bauman, Müller and others. To describe this immigration she uses terms like hospitality, guest and host. Even in her introduction, it's clear that all these terms have to do the double duty of abstract terms of social description as well as refer to actual guests and hosts.

² Heiner Müller was a citizen of the GDR, although he spent much of his life in West Germany, working.

to a place and barred from exit.” (31): Thus, Bauman describes tourism as a precarious state of travel, pulled towards home and pushing away from it.

Roughly speaking, the 1950s represented an extraordinary time in American poetry. As Robert von Hallberg explains convincingly, a multitude of American poets went on trips all over the world (Hallberg 62ff). In 1951, Charles Olson, founder of the Black Mountain school of poetry, went to the Yucatan for a year, and among his peers, he might have been the one staying closest to home. In the following years James Wright went to Austria, Richard Howard went to France and Robert Creeley, the other titan of the Black Mountain school, went to Mallorca, thus at least staying in the same language family as his friend Olson. In the 1950s, James Merrill, scion of the founder of Merrill-Lynch, went to live in Rome and Greece, with later stints in Japan. John Ashbery left the US in 1955 to live in France for a decade³, Richard Wilbur marveled at Italian fountains and Adrienne Rich traveled all over Europe on a scholarship (Hallberg 62). All of these poets are among the very best and most important poets of their age, thus demonstrating how deeply the move of American poetry towards travel and tourism went in those days.

And all this despite an ingrained hostility towards tourism in American literary culture. To quote Henry James: “Our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial”⁴ and Emerson, as one would expect, was particularly stern on the subject: “For the most part, only the light characters travel”. That is as Olson, too, saw it (Hallberg 63). And it is not an accident that these travels by the literary elite happened in the 1950s. After WWII, America reached not only for the economic, but also for a cultural hegemony, and unlike its rule over today's culture, in the 1950s, poetry and other high powered literary projects were seen as ideal means of bringing that rule about. In their travels and writing, American poets repeated the Grand Tours of 18th century British imperial culture, in a naked attempt to put their own imperial stamp on a culture rising from the ashes of a brutal war⁵. Additionally, Americans were increasingly attracted by the sites of imperialism, ranging from Egypt to Asia and South America, and in the work dealing with those areas, which Mary Louise Pratt, in her classic study of travel writing, calls “contact zones”, American poets are dealing more directly with the issues of imperialism and colonialism. Contact Zones, in Pratt's parlance, are “the space and time, where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present” (Pratt 8) – this strikes me as an important notion for understanding travel. Instead of separating

³ Stays like Ashbery's long decade in France do not, on the face of it, appear to be tourism – both for the reason of economic equivalence and the duration of the stay. That kind of argument fails to contextualize these travels in the American literary context – especially with writers like Henry James, whose work is full of tourists who have lived in Europe for long periods of time.

⁴ This observation is one of many examples of the abovementioned attitude of Henry James regarding perpetual American tourists.

⁵ On this topic, see especially Yothers who offers an excellent discussion of the emergency of the sites of the Levant as Protestant tropes. Although Yother's interest is more cultural than political, his discussion is fertile for application in political contexts, as well. Max Weber comes to mind.

the traveler and the traveled-to country from each other, it allows us to focus on their co-presence, and the resulting asymmetries of power.

These asymmetries are more visible and interesting in the work of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop than in most of their contemporaries. In the 1950s, Lowell's fame as a poet and cultural figure was such that people suggested to the state department to send Lowell abroad in order to convince foreigners of America's cultural superiority⁶. Despite this and his occasional travels, it is not Lowell's physical travels around the world that will be interesting for us in this paper. We will focus on how home and abroad, how cultural hegemony and the private space of the American home almost make of Lowell a restless tourist within the walls of his own home. In Lowell's work, the concept of home is expanded, but unlike 19th century colonialism, it does not simply encompass empire. Instead, Lowell marries the expansiveness of travel and empire with the narrowness of postwar notions of privacy and new narratives of the self. Elizabeth Bishop's travels and life are seemingly more straightforward, as she moved to Brazil in the 1950s to live with her lesbian partner, a Brazilian architect and activist called Lota de Macedo Soares⁷.

Her travel poems are similarly straightforward, containing explicit discussions of travels to places ranging from the Middle East to Brazil and Canada. Bishop's is an extraordinarily descriptive work⁸. But as Johannes Fabian has pointed out, that very descriptiveness can be an act of appropriation, an exercise of epistemic mastery. To quote Fabian: "there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act" (Fabian 1). Bishop merits inclusion among the travelers⁹, despite settling in Brazil and living there for 15 years. I'll explain why: Bishop was born in the US and died in the US, and even though she grew up in Canada (more specifically, in Nova Scotia), her life, personally and culturally, always revolved around the United States, and her values and cultures were formed accordingly¹⁰. Even while living in Brazil with a Brazilian partner, her work and letters always evince a distinct sense of alienation between her and that culture. As an American, she shaped the contact zones and her gaze was that of the tourist: powerful, restless and with a firm sense of "here" and "there", where "here" is

⁶ Frances Stonor Saunders entertainingly details one of the occasions that Lowell was sent abroad by the state department, and notes that, despite its disastrous end, they almost ended up sending him out the very next year (Saunders 347ff).

⁷ Carmen Oliveira's biographical narrative *Rare and Commonplace Flowers* offers a rare inside view of that relationship from a Brazilian angle.

⁸ As Pickard points out, Bishop's famed powers of observation are carefully tied to the emergence of modern science, particularly evolutionary theory. Canteñs has done interesting work on how Darwin's taxonomy can be both useful and difficult in interrogations of cultural identity.

⁹ Although Kim Fortuny, in her study of Bishop's "Art of Travel", carefully warns that "Bishop was not a travel writer per se" (25), she makes an excellent case for Bishop as a traveller.

¹⁰ Curry's chapter on Bishop in *White Women Writing White* is one of the few sharp examinations of those "values" and a far cry from the insistence of, for example, Robert Hallberg who maintains that Bishop writes "brilliantly about [...] class relations" (127). My discussion of Bishop's relationship to Brazil is heavily indebted to Curry.

connoted as home. Even Brazilians noted this distance between her and the country she lived in. In a curious aside in his memoir, Caetano Veloso mentions her in the context of the military dictatorship that she supported for a while (Veloso 6), being as she was both engaged politically and disengaged from the petty matters in this country that she did not properly belong to. With Müller's sense of the tourist as someone looking down on the country they visit as in a peep show, that's clearly applicable here, for example.

Bishop's work predicated on the interrogation of landscapes. As far as her travel poetry to places other than Canada is concerned, there are two distinct kind of poems. One accompanies her as she enters or traverses Brazil. As I said before, Bishop spent 15 years living in Brazil and several more years traveling there and back with her partner, Lota Soares. These poems are almost always problematic in how they present that country. Von Hallberg analyzes her travel poetry and points out that much of it is layered with transcendental meanings due to the Emersonian tradition (Hallberg 68f). As was already mentioned, there was a deep unease in American literature as it concerns travel – the worry of producing light work was overwhelming. Another factor in this is what Terry Cesar pointed out: “many American travelers in the 19th century felt American identity lacked stability and traveling afforded Americans an opportunity to define their nationality.” (Schmeller 42) Both the Emersonian guilt, as well as the American tradition of travel-as-nation building have made it deep into the marrow of 20th century poetry and, too, into Bishop's work.

But there is more going on than just that. Like Lowell, Bishop engages in a personal writing, a writing of the self, and just as American travellers used their writing to define what their Nation was, so she uses it to define her self¹¹. This, however, lays an interesting power distribution bare: Elizabeth Bishop was a queer writer, but for much of her life she hid her sexuality¹². Bishop personally resisted being read autobiographically, and she resisted being read as a “female poet”. However, from the 1980s on, these facets of her writing were perceived more sharply, a process started by the recently deceased poet Adrienne Rich, who wrote in a 1984 essay called “The Eye of the Outsider” that “through most of her life, Bishop was critically and consciously trying to explore marginality, power and powerlessness” (18). Rich saw in Bishop a precursor to her own outspoken feminist poetry. This, however, is a fundamentally skewed observation and hides the fact that Bishop frequently wrote poetry about South America that imposed her epistemological power on the people she describes. The woman who spoke Portuguese and Spanish well enough to translate poetry from those languages writes in her poem “Arrival at Santos”: “the customs officials will speak English we hope” (66). It may seem like a small detail, but the preference of using English despite having mastered the native language is significant. In fact, if one was to look at her letters, Bishop often didn't manage to hide her disdain for the latinate languages

¹¹ The connection between writings of the self and accounts of travels, especially the Grand Tour is made blindingly obvious by Casey Blanton's study of travel and the self.

¹² For a discussion about the possible impact that Bishop's hidden sexuality had on her work, see Shetley 31ff.

which she proclaimed to be “noisy”. In another letter she complains about “all this Latin hysteria. WHY do they carry on so? I am so sick of it.”¹³ “Arrival at Santos” itself doubles almost as a manifest of her travel poetry. A poem which dramatizes the arrival at a contact zone, it ends with the declaration “we leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior” (66). It is hard not to see behind this the impatience with the reality around her. “Driving to the interior” has in Bishop scholarship widely been seen as a veiled comment about autobiographical writing¹⁴, especially in how it echoes Teresa of Avila's “Interior Castle”, a work of Spanish mysticism that had a profound impact on Bishop's work. In this poem and poems like it, Bishop is not quite a tourist and not quite a colonialist. She does go beyond what Bauman sketched as the involvement of the tourist, but stops short of the epistemological mapping common to colonialist narratives.

In another poem, “Questions of Travel” she interrogates the act of travel, as the title suggests. Mirroring what Bauman said about the indeterminacy of “home” to the tourist, she writes: “Think of the long trip home./Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?/Where should we be today?” (74) and later “Should we have stayed at home/ wherever that may be?” (75) This is then coupled with a straightforward interrogation of her own gaze: “is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?” (74) Clearly, Bishop is aware of her gaze, aware of how it works. Observations like the one about the play could have easily been part of one of Jean Genet's dramatic critiques of colonialism.

I think the ideological problems in Bishop's work are connected to that “Eye of the Outsider” that Adrienne Rich detected. Bishop is entrenched in writing her own outsider self, and she uses her writing, her observations to finally fashion a narrative of self by transforming Brazil and other places into private spaces. Significant poems like “In The Waiting Room”, which details a moment of self-identification, the discovery of categories and of identity:

But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them. (150)

The fulcrum for this insight is a perusal of an old copy of the National Geographic, and this image in particular.

Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying. (149)

¹³ Both quoted by Curry, who also offers an insightful discussion of those quotes and other Bishop poems like “Faustina” in her Bishop chapter.

¹⁴ See for example Hicok 123, Schwartz 125, Walker 62 and many others. Susan McCabe even offers us a Freudian reading (152).

The discovery of female identity comes at the cost of reproducing a very negative racial image¹⁵.

So now it is time to look at Robert Lowell. Despite his travels, we are not interested in his skill as a chronicler of physical travels here. Instead, Lowell's work allows us to illuminate a not infrequent but interesting situation. Much more than Bishop, Lowell's work is localized in American culture. In fact, Robert Lowell represents America in his heritage like no other poet of his time. His is one of the oldest families in Boston and he is related to many of the most influential figures in early American history. His work consistently reflects that heritage and interrogates it. But in many ways, his work is also the result of a writing that was made possible by the new age of travel, of American cultural influence and appropriation. He is, to use that oft-quoted Williamsian phrase, a writer "in the American grain"¹⁶, a true heir to Emerson and William Carlos Williams – at the same time, his work is open to the world. Tourists in his family and in the broader country at large have brought home photography, trophies and narratives, and they have made it all the way into his work.

To examine Lowell's use of travel, it is helpful to turn to the theories of James Clifford, who suggests that there are two distinct kinds of travel. There is the actual travel that people undertake, and then there's cultural travel, which is what takes place when books or other texts travel to other countries and are read and understood there. For Clifford, this means that all borders and distinctions between cultures become less firm. Travelers carry their own culture with them, but they meet people who, through meeting them, also change, also travel. As the expression "traveling cultures" suggests, Clifford's focus is more on cultures than on the travelers carrying the cultures from place to place, especially since cultures can travel through as simple a fashion as having TV or Internet access. Clifford does not designate private homes as contact zones, instead pointing to public spaces like hotel lobbies (Clifford 25); I think they are applicable here nonetheless.

Lowell's home is such a contact zone. To understand that, let us go back to Williams' complaint, mentioned at the outset of the paper. A good example is his statement, in criticizing TS Eliot, "we are here not to read, but to become Dante". (qtd. in Moody 4) As we saw, much of American postwar poetry paid homage to the European greats by praising monuments and the dominant literary traditions. Lowell is not free of that. But his enduring contribution to literature is the detail oriented poetry of confession. As Deborah Nelson in her excellent study on the development of the notion of privacy in the American culture shows, a genuinely American idea was afoot, and writers led by Lowell provided the literature for it. The smallest unit

¹⁵ The unconscious impact of her racial images can be traced through many works of scholarship. One example is Laurel Corelle, who, in paraphrasing the descriptions, talks about "mutilated and possibly cannibalized" women (101) – even though there is no mention of cannibalism at all. Bishop's image was strong enough to induce Corelle to reach for a very specific epistemological construction of race.

¹⁶ The largely uncontroversial statement that Lowell, as a writer 'in the American grain', is in part produced by the economical rise of the US, is additionally obliquely supported by Dwight Macdonald's screed against „masscult“, the culture of the masses, titled *Against the American Grain*.

of privacy, at least in Lowell's reading of confessionalism¹⁷, is the home. Lowell's work examines the interiors of his childhood homes, he lays down the borders of his private space, he defines what "home" means in a very detailed, careful fashion. And this method extends to poems about marriage, suicide and broader political events. Lowell engages in a writing on self that explicitly defines and redefines the newly discovered private spaces. So what we have is a poet, in many ways as American as Apple Pie, and yet, when he describes these spaces, they are suddenly discovered to be full of odd objects, brought home by travelers. "Father's Bedroom" is a perfect example of this method. The poem starts by assembling observations:

In my Father's bedroom:
blue threads as thin
as pen-writing on the bedspread,
blue dots on the curtains,
a blue kimono,
Chinese sandals with blue plush straps.
The broad-planked floor
had a sandpapered neatness.
The clear glass bed-lamp
with a white doily shade
was still raised a few
inches by resting on volume two
of Lafcadio Hearn's
Glimpses of unfamiliar Japan. (57)

Now, these objects are not originally tourist objects. Boston was home to merchants engaged in the china trade, and Lowell's family was in the middle of those events¹⁸, but arguably the changed political and literary context in which they and similar things surface in Lowell's work, transforms these objects. There is a different economic and political situation and as was pointed out, Lowell's work was part of creating a new culture of self. The effect on Lowell's American spaces is such that it creates a hybrid cultural space, a new contact zone in the Cliffordian sense.

Lowell is not a pilgrim in his own interiors, he jumps, like the tourist in Bauman's definition, from time capsule to time capsule, taking pictures, examining the experience. He is a liminal tourist in his own home, having not arrived or left

¹⁷ This last phrase is important, because to a contemporary understanding of confessionalism, the smallest unit could be the individual or the individual conscience. For Lowell, this would be an inaccurate assumption. What is understood by confessionalism today is not what Lowell, the poet associated with inventing it, or Rosenthal, the critic associated with coining the term, necessarily understood by it. In the first chapter ("Confessionalism and its discontents") of his pioneering study of John Berryman, Philip Coleman does a great job of critically examining the term, its application, history and problems.

¹⁸ For a thorough and clear discussion of the social and cultural background of the objects in the poem, see. Frank Kearful's essay on the poem. Kearful offers an in-depth look at how Lowell constructs his poem, and how this connects both to Lowell's biography, Bostonian (and American history) and the rest of Lowell's work.

anywhere, yet having, in the Clifford sense of the term, traveled anyway. This is not a subjectivity altering pilgrimage, this is the jolt of first encounters, in the most private of spaces. And it puts the asymmetries of power in full display. While Lowell does not directly exercise a colonial gaze, I think the objects represent a deferred gaze, an epistemic certainty, a discourse of the other that is so well-defined, that mere trinkets are enough to be used as encounters with a defamiliarizing other in a familiar setting. And of course, Lowell explicitly mentions a book, Lafcadio Hearn's *Glimpses of unfamiliar Japan*¹⁹. So one of the objects intended to represent the oriental other specifically includes a Western narrative of that other, a canonical 19th century text that exoticizes a strange country. Homi K. Bhabha famously, following Frantz Fanon's work, sees "the racial stereotype of colonial discourse in terms of fetishism" (106). Although this would lead us too far, I would suggest that the location of this specific book, the nature of this specific private space and the notion of fetishism (which is always connected to castration and impotence²⁰) is not a mere accident, but that Lowell's work, paradoxically, displays a critical awareness of the issues it otherwise uncritically reproduces²¹.

In writing the American self, both Bishop and Lowell engaged global narratives in constructing private spaces. But what I wanted to show is the way both writers seem to criticize and at the same time support colonialist narratives and gazes. I think one of the problems in creating these autobiographical stories, while ensconced in (neo)colonialist discourses is a certain epistemological inescapability. In an earlier footnote, I pointed out that emancipatory transnational processes cannot be read without reference to consumerist modernity and its empire, starting in the early 19th century. One consequence from this view of the state of things is the line of thinking that we find in Dipesh Chakrabarty's unique study *Provincializing Europe*, which offers a brilliant reading on the impact of European "traditions" on its former colonies. At the same time, and more relevant to this paper, Chakrabarty calls for us to accept contradiction, to accept the plurality of present and learn to disengage from narratives of history as a developmental process. Tourism as it's manifested in Bishop's work is such a contradiction. In an essay on Bishop and fellow Canadian poet P.K. Page, Kevin McNeilly points out that Bishop did not want to be a tourist, that she looked askance at the life of the tourist and yet, her Brazilian poetry fulfills "the tourist's dream [...] to have her self projected back."

¹⁹ Sumiko Higashi discusses Hearn's work as a consumerist fantasy, an exoticist guide for "the burgeoning consumer culture" (336). In a way, Hearn's American work is merely a continuation of a process that started with Byron and Shelley, as documented by Saree Makdisi, who offers us an image of modernization as "a hegemonic project" (Makdisi 181). If we discuss transnational processes, it is important to look at work like Higashi's and Makdisi's, which show to what extent global practices started with 19th century proto-consumerist narratives.

²⁰ This link is most interestingly explored in connection to American literature by Carl Eby in his somewhat lugubrious study of Hemingway. Whatever misgivings I might have towards the book as literary criticism are eclipsed by its value as a presentation of the Freudian terms as they might be applied to literary works.

²¹ Barbara Estrin offers such a Freudian reading of Lowell's work, although she focuses more on issues like "infantile separation anxiety" (122).

(McNeilly) Her attempt to be personal does not lead away from the superficiality of travel, it increases the distance between the poet and Brazil. Similarly, the discussion of Lowell's poems of Bostonian interiors and cultural travels as outlined by James Clifford showed that even a clear awareness of difficulties involved in the cultural construction of private spaces do not protect the poet from also, at the same time, reproducing it. And yet, and this is the generous insight of Chakrabarty, readers should not try to mediate between these tensions, or be disheartened by the perseverance of oppressive mechanisms. Accepting contradiction, might help us understand the work of traveling American poets more than any attempt to find one consistent underlying opinion.

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