Trabajo Fin de Grado

Objectivity of Maps and Language of Description in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop

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Abstract

This paper will try to cover the ways in which Elizabeth Bishop's writings would be connected to cartography, the art of map-making and physical spaces. It will also attempt to explain the influence of perspective in both poetry and geography and the relationship between writing and space, paying special attention to the way Bishop's language and detailed descriptions of physical reality are able to express the defamiliarization of one's surroundings and create a false sense of objectivity. For the exploration of all of these concepts I will be concentrating on different selected poems included in her published anthologies, choosing to focus on her poems *The Map, 12 O'clock News*, *Poem* and *Sandpiper*.

Keywords

Elizabeth Bishop, cartography, poetry, maps, language, perspective

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1. Introduction

Writing during the last years of the modernist movement, Elizabeth Bishop is commonly known for her highly detailed language and the tight relationship her poetry has with the physical world. While these ideas were not unfamiliar to American modernist poets, she takes them one step further, making them the central part of her writings and providing an extension of them in her works. She explores this link between language and the world through means of description, as she seems to be constantly trying to map the Earth, to give an account of its surface in several different ways in the same poem as if she was not fully sure where she stands. She displays a relentless sense of displacement in her writings, emotion she was quite familiar with, having spent her entire childhood on the constant move (Baym 2166). Being characterized by her sharp perception of the physical world, her poetry is filled of descriptions that are seemingly objective but are constantly trying to redefine what is being portrayed. Her simple and direct language of description is mainly focused on natural landscapes, showing an especial interest in the dichotomy between land and sea. This idea is introduced in a great number of her works, including her poem *The Map* (1935), its first line being: "Land lies in water; it is shadowed green. / Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges," (Bishop 1-2). With nature always as a central figure of her poetry, perspective and its readjustment are what she uses to build her poems up, offering a poetic voice that acts as a traveler. However, her poetry being bounded to the physical realm does not mean it lacks imagination, as the word "descriptive" might suggest, but to her capacity of giving mundane objects a new image through her detailed eye (Mazzaro 171).

She met modernist poet Marianne Moore, who was one of the most important people all throughout her life and a pivotal figure in the construction of her poetics, during her years in Vassar College, from where she graduated in 1934 (Baym 2166). Since then, both Moore and Bishop's works have been constantly associated to each other's, even by their contemporaries. Although this both flattered and embittered the two women, Bishop admitted that Moore's poems introduced her the possibility of the subject matter she would later use in her poetry (Kalstone 4). Her cool manners are easily recognized in the way she expresses her admiration to Moore in one of her diaries:

> Miss Moore's "architectural" method of conversation, not seemingly so much for the sake of what she says as the way in which it is said: indifferent subject matter treated as a problem of accuracy, proportion, solidity, balance. If she speaks of a chair you can practically sit on it when she has finished. It is still life, easel painting, as opposed to the common conversational "fade out" (qtd. in Kalstone 11-12).

This can also be taken as an outline of the direction her poetry would follow in the future, with the use of her immediate physical surroundings in her poems and her meticulous descriptions of everyday objects. Knowing the power of structures in poetry, she preferred to use those she considered able to hold intense feelings rather than emotional words (Baym 2166); this means that she generally sticks to traditional forms of poetry, such as sonnets, maintaining certain level of complexity in her rhyming patterns and opting for a less affected language (Blasing 70). Her aim seems to be that of describing the smallest details of reality working within language's limits, making use of metaphors and introducing several different viewpoints and angles from where to look at reality; "we do not read her to discover the details of her biography, yet I feel that we end up knowing her." (Seminar). Although the general tendency of critics has been to simply label Bishop as Moore's second coming, John Ashbery — in his review of Elizabeth's complete poems — made a point in saying that both author's bodies of work are more different than similar, Bishop's approach being linear and scrutinizing and thus contrasting with Moore's more conciliatory attitude. Ultimately, Moore's influence put Bishop on the modernist agenda and served her as a platform to grow into the poet that she became.

2. On Maps, Relativity and History.

Bishop opens her anthology *Geography III* (1977) with an extract of a lesson found in a geography textbook that sets out basic questions about geography itself:

> What is Geography?
> A description of the Earth's surface.
> (…)
> What is a Map?
> A picture of the whole, or a part, of the Earth's surface.
> What are the directions on a Map?

> Toward the Top, North; toward the Bottom, South; to the Right, East; to the Left, West
> (…)
> In what direction is the volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? (…)

This passage can be taken as an illustration of her interest about maps and the stance she takes when facing them. She wonders what and where is away, as posed in the multiple questions at the end of the epigraph that suggest a persistent sense of displacement. It is a topic that comes up in most of her works, starting with her famous poem *The Map*, which also touches various subjects that are common in a lot of her subsequent poems.

As the opening poem of her first published anthology *North & South* (1935), *The Map* shows the ways in which she connected map-making and poetry. Just like in the process of mapping a geographical surface, writers build narrative maps that exert an influence on the way the reader perceive the world that is being depicted (Giles 178). This union of maps and writers is not hidden in the poem, where she writes: "The names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains" (Bishop 14-15). Both cartographers and writers present space in a concrete, palpable way, narrowing down the parts and holding them together in a less broad frame. Being so, she uses extensively descriptive language that would make her sound neutral as far as the poetic voice is describing what she is perceiving. But in the same way Bishop knows perception is not absolute, she knows better than to trust maps to give an accurate description of the world, mistrust that she expresses in her attitude towards the relationship between forms of representation and physical objects (Giles 198). As far as her apparent indifference and impartiality go, they both have their origin in her desire of objectivity, but the way she expresses it can lead the reader to think that the poetic voice is able to express anything other than her point of view. As Bolin points out, Bishop evokes another poet that also dealt with cartography in his works, Richard Hugo:

> His muddled use of directional terms—"east" and "right" indicating the same thing—points to one problem of maps, of a small object, lines printed on paper, standing in for an impossibly large one, land. These challenges of language highlight maps' artificiality, their distance from what they are supposed to represent. (Bolin para. 8)

Both maps and poets start off their works from a center that is absolutely relative, relativity that Bishop tries to associate maps with rather than redefining the land through her descriptions. She does this by constantly readjusting her viewpoint, by building temporal comparisons and metaphors that connect the world she knows, what she sees, with the natural world, that remains a mystery (Donoghue 249). The very beginning of the poem already shows how the map-maker is not able to demonstrate that every inch of land represented on a map is not an island or if it extends under the sea's vastness:

> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
> showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
> where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
> Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
> drawing it unperturbed around itself?
> Along the fine tan sandy shelf
> is the land tugging at the sea from under? (2-8)

The reexamination of one's knowledge through means of perspective and the decision of what to discard, what to revise and what to keep in one's memory is studied in a poised manner, almost removing the poetic voice from the poem. She "makes a distinction between knowledge and language; looks and vision. Through the assumption that language is knowledge, she criticizes the romantic "infant eye"; that that does not need of language to possess knowledge." (Doreski 5-6). The poetic voice is in constant wonder of whether what she knows is true or just appearance, since she cannot trust the map. While the first sentence of the poem makes a descriptive statement that appears somewhat immovable, the following lines are occupied in making sure the reader's viewpoint shifts along with the speaker's, making sure nothing else comes off as absolute by questioning everything that is being stated. Despite it being earth-bound, there is a constant change in it derived from a sense of continual readjustment that tries to stress the relativity of the poetic voice's point of view. There is no aim of redefinition as there is one of arising questions concerning perspective and representation, and an attempt of mapping the surface of the word and of putting several different perspectives together in a comprehensible way, since they do not have meaning on their own. (Hammer).

She does not deprecate the map-maker's art, but she advocates for the derogation of maps as absolute interpretations. She proceeds to match the map-maker with the poet rather than with the historians, about who writes that "More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors." (Bishop 27), which "identifies the poet's aim less with the historian's immersion in temporal flux than with the mapmaker's attempt to fix boundaries in visual image" (Gelpi 60). Donoghue mentions the notion of historical geography in relation to this, which would be the understanding and use of the information provided by topographical changes as a way of interpreting a region's history, thus relating geography and time (169). In other words, maps are inevitably linked to history, since spatial configuration is nothing but a product of time. She illustrates this in its naming of Newfoundland and Labrador, whose waters are often associated with the Inuit, who also appear in the poem as some kind of dreamy image. Again, this would be connected with how the illustrations of a map cannot be informative without words, and words cannot represent the land as acutely as a map. The notion of time cannot be excluded from her poetry, just as the notion of history cannot be separated from maps.

However, it is true that the need of establishing herself in space rather than in time is evident; there is a linearity in her poetry that does not ensure clear temporal boundaries. Bishop's poetry is generally regarded as one of place and travel partly because she does not deal with time in an explicit way: "everything happens in a perpetual present which is a collage of objects and our impressions of them" (Ashbery, Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop). The notion of time is vaguer because she does not only adjust space but also time, which is harder to grasp. Mazzano's stance is that Bishop often tries to center her attention in one time and place to avoid falling in a nostalgic tone, delineating the world in such a fussy way that sentimentality is hardly perceived in her words (179). Again, this has much to do with the opposition between representations and represented: while maps are usually perceived as timeless objects, poetry is more associated with its context, it is space and time bounded. Elizabeth is aware of the existent gap between physical and psychic space and, according to Giles, she works towards evincing it in her poetry, at the risk of falling into surrealism in her aim of presenting different perspectives (241). On that account, relativity would be the reason that, after looking at Bishop's works, one might find that the poetic eye is not as objective as one might have thought. It is also the reason behind peninsulas taking oceans between thumb and finger "like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods" (Bishop 19), as if they were some kind of addition to the continent, or names of cities overrunning mountains. The map

represents some kind of mean of emotional escape for the poetic voice, “as when emotion too far exceeds its cause” (Bishop 17). The collage Ashbery referred to is Bishop’s presentation of her geographical world, which does not lack sensitivity despite the sense of objectivity she is after with her extensive use of the language of description.

It is undeniable that memory exists in her works, but it is treated in a way that distances itself from being established as the essential foundation of her poetry and becomes a trigger for description. Donoghue relates memory and the notion of home, about which says that “is rarely more than provisional in her poetry, even though her conviction of being real seems to depend more upon houses and places and her presence in them than upon historical epiphanies, golden spots of time” (268). The physical world and her presence in it urge her to write, travelling in time through words that are triggered by memories. Mazzaro calls this “mnemonics”, because the poet waits until objects provoke a reaction in her (175), echoing her own impressions of them without falling in sentimentality and suppressing pity. However, because the notion of home can be taken as the center, the starting point of one’s perspective, it becomes the reason why Bishop’s viewpoint is in constant readjustment. “Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.” (26); she either lacks a center or it is big enough to lack boundaries, taking the world as her home (Spiegelman 56).

3. Intertwining Knowledge, Metaphors and Language of Description.

Bishop’s relativity, as mentioned before, is expressed through means of the readjustment of perspective. Only by being radically relative is she able to keep up with a world that is in perpetual change. This is possible when the writer becomes aware of the process of perception and chooses it as one of the subjects of her poetry (Hammer). In *The Map,* the reader is seeing the same thing as the poetic voice, who is describing it in real time. On the one hand, the poetic eye’s voice is intimate in the way she shows vulnerability with the act of posing questions since the first stanza; on the other hand, it is as if by being above the descripted object rendered a sense of control over it, just like cartographers took over the art of map-making (Blasing 75). Harvey’s way of putting this to words is referring to the poetic voice as the “seeing eye” that speaks from an aerial position, “completely out of plastic or sensory reach” (qtd. Blasing 84). In other words, the poetic voice describes the map in a distant style, treating it as a work of art rather than as something informative and disregarding the map’s scale:

Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish. (10-14)

The moony Eskimo is bigger than Labrador, paints it yellow and towers over the map, just as both the reader and the poetic voice are able to put whole bays under a glass. Yet it is in this stanza where the metaphorical side of the poetic voice begins to show, and when subjectivity begins to win against objectivity. The level of detail maintained by the poetic voice begins to take a life of its own; "These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods." (19-20) and Norway takes the shape of the coney it resembles.

As a poet of travel, her focus on maps and her fixation with the visual aspects of language is sempiternal in her poetry. She travelled a lot in her lifetime; this made her aware of language's dependency of visual commodities: "Abroad, you need a map, some ease in language, access to the lore, and the various artifacts which take possession of your space; conventions, newspapers, photographs, pictures, back numbers of the National Geographic" (Donoghue 249). She sticks to what she perceives from her aerial vision, which happens to be a lot. Such is the case in her poem *Sandpiper* (1965), in which she introduces the figure of the sandpiper and takes over the perspective of this bird.

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

- Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains. (8-12)

Her observation skills that we recognize because of her sharp use of description are only deterred by her acute unassertiveness, as she does not want to impose any viewpoint but rather share them. She uses description to build the poem as well as to bond the poet to a place in the map. Again, she reexamines the poetic voice's own perception when she says that the bird is not observing his own feet but the spaces between sand grains, and pictures the bird running between two natural forces that are to be pinned down and dissected.

And, just like the bird, the poetic eye strokes the border between known and the unknown, reality and representation.

> The world is a mist. And then the world is
> minute and vast and clear. The tide
> is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
> His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,
>
> looking for something, something, something.
> Poor bird, he is obsessed!
> The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray
> mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst (8-20)

At times, she appears to not believe in the real world, yet her piercing sight is able to take in every little detail of it. Time is not defined: events are blurred under the assumption that they are not happening all at once. The bird cannot distinguish where the tides end or what he is looking for ("something, something, something"), stressing the poem's sense of disorientation; he is not able to access to the bigger picture because he is a part of it, so he focuses on detail, just like the poetic voice. "Her resistance to abstraction makes her look in control of what she says and the subjects she touches. (…) The language, duly plainspoken, blends humankind with nature. (…) How things look trade off with how she looks at them, in Bishop's take on the world around her." (Felstiner 229). Rather than moving *from* detail, she moves *towards* it, with the last stanza detaining the most little items in the picture she is planting in the reader's mind. This works in two directions, for the fuzziness of perspective expands the world accessible to the poetic eye at the same time that its exhaustive definition on paper constrains it.

Bishop establishes herself as an observer that diminishes her own observations through the dilemma of perception and knowledge. Her awareness of language is what makes her poetry appear simple and transparent rather than turbulent, and in no apparent relation with the interior world. There is a careful work behind her language and the process of choosing a structure where to express an idea in a way that appears casual (Gelpi 62). "Her appearance of simplicity depends upon a clarity of direct statement and a carefully delineated series of landscapes and dramatic situations. (…) Her language apparently focuses on the physical instead of the spiritual or the inside of the mind. But

it still exteriorizes a pastoral interior" (Doreski 3). By the means of the language she uses, it is as if she is being dragged to a world that cannot be avoided and thus retracting to the stability of the world of poetry. About this, Ashbery mentions that she uses her works as a way of processing the real world and of examining the objects found in it, revealing it to be as full of possibilities as the poetic world. In a way, she is in a continual state of exploration of reality, discovering "the unreality of our reality at the very moment of becoming conscious of it as reality" (Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop).

Once an object grabs her attention, her mission is to try to give as many definitions of it as possible by means of description, sketching reality through words in a painter style, defining its shape and color. She herself writes in a letter that "it has been one of my dreams that someday someone would think of Vermeer, without my saying it first" (Bishop qtd. in Haft 38). Naming and its process are essential part of her poetry, and in her poem *Poem* (1976) she is able to show that she operates with paintings in the same way she does with maps, with the certainty that both are tools to illustrate the world but are not able to define it:

> It must be Nova Scotia; only there
> does one see abled wooden houses
> painted that awful shade of brown.
> The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
> Elm trees., low hills, a thin church steeple
> -that gray-blue wisp-or is it? In the foreground
> a water meadow with some tiny cows,
> two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
> two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
> back-to-back,, feeding, and a slanting stick.
> Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
> fresh-squiggled from the tube.
> The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
> clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
> below the steel-gray storm clouds.
> (They were the artist's specialty.)
> A specklike bird is flying to the left.
> Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird? (9-25)

Felstiner is also interested in this facet of her poetry, affirming that "she is aware that art only fakes reality ("the bits that show"), and that a "grayblue wisp" might give us what we wish to see. "After decades of grime cleaned away, and magnified five times, maybe, just maybe that steeple wisp appears." (234). The poem exemplifies the aspect of her poetry where she allows herself to enjoy the descriptive process, mirroring the excitement mentioned to have been found in *The Map*: "Still and all, a pastoral emerges, line by line reminding us how paint, illusion, imagination bring the world alive. (As William Carlos Williams said, "*it's what you put on the canvas and how you put it on… words! Pigment! Put on!*") Peering back into this scene, Bishop finds white above all—the houses, now geese and iris." (qtd. Williams, Felstiner 234). This last part refers to the names and adjectives she uses in the poem to define the objects the poetic voice is seeing, almost disregarding the use of verbs in the process. As one reads the poem, it becomes clear that she is juggling with scales, memory, art and description in real time again, just as in our first poem but perhaps using a slightly more abstract approach, yet overall dealing with its details in her characteristically detached and redefining way.

There is also an identifiable pattern in her poetry, which is to set something in motion and following its rhythm and accompanying it with formal elements: "she communicates ideas by employing a formal structure with its own elements and conventions. The brevity and simplicity of her language allow the piece, like a map, to be taken quickly by the eye" (Haft 43). After setting the poem in motion, she gives it the freedom to go wherever it wants to go, mnemonics making it possible for the poet to speak her mind and to introduce rather imaginative metaphors. In *Poet* we notice this when the poetic voice abruptly interrupts the flow of her meditations with a sudden exclamation: "Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" (27). From then on, as photographic as the poem may have come off as, it starts showing the speaker's more intimate and private voice. In a way, she is shifting perspective once again in an attempt to put together different interpretations of the reality being described: "By concentrating on the visual elements of the object, one can take comfort in the surface of things and in the process of describing them, while recognizing their resistance to a final interpretation. The liminal space between the object and the word is where Bishop located feeling in (…) her poems." (Biele 92-93). Again, the process of perception takes over the object in a vivid way and connects it to the source of feelings.

Given this ability to describe physical objects through means of memory in a process that can be compared, in a way, to the process of repossession of the land the map-maker follows, Bishop is always wary about depicting the "bits that show" she grasps in an overly assertive way, offering a great number of angles of description. Her knowledge of the world comes from her observation skills and her sharp eye, and despite knowing that words are as imperfect as image, she turns to language of description to try to represent it. "Bishop's writings hinge upon the knowledge within the world, lying within the very surface of her poetry. She would surely assent to Wallace Stevens' view that "[Poetry] is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock." Her poetic emerges from a writing governed by exposure through and by language in which knowledge itself requires reticence and control." (Doreski 9). However, details act as a boundary in her poetry, closing over the reader's head as the act of looking "absorbs the object with its meaning" (Ashbery qtd. in Donoghue 274). Although Mazzaro points out this same issue, claiming that such body of detail might have the effect of "impeding" the reader's imagination, he also defends that it is precisely through those details that Bishop is able to archive a sense of defamiliarization of everyday objects, highlighting qualities in them that a normal eye might not notice and presenting them under a new light.

4. Bishop as the Ultimate Map-maker.

Her poem *12 O'clock News* (1976) is where her objectivity and imaginative voice are the closest. The poem is going to map a surface in the way she has her readers used to, only this time she is mapping the surface of a table as if it were a full-size territory, taking advantage of her developed cautiousness and her ability of strategic readjustment (Giles 256). The title directs the poem towards the question of representation of territory in media, this time in a television or radio outlet, and the poetic eye takes on the viewpoint of a journalist, describing what they see from a birdlike position. It locates the reader in front of the television while the poetic voice/journalist takes account of the territory she is observing using an aseptic, impersonal tone.

The poem is a combination of two columns: one that holds all the descriptive details the poetic voice is reporting and that deals with a battlefield, and the other enumerating a series of desk objects often used by writers. This way, it is able to draw a metaphor between a full-size landscape and an imaginary map sketched from objects found on a desk, demonstrating how the act of mapping itself does not have to be subjected to rigid scales in order to present space in an assailable manner. She constructs

metaphors not only from the physical space she is describing, but also from the poetic structure she is working with:

gooseneck lamp

As you all know, tonight is the night of the full moon, half the world over. But here the moon seems to hang motionless in the sky. It give very little light; it could be dead. Visibility is poor. Nevertheless, we shall try to give you some idea of the lay of the land and the present situation. (1-6)

The poetic voice is describing a gooseneck lamp as if it were the moon hanging over the countryside, continuing to describe a foreign landscape through familiar objects. The structure of the poem does not change but the metaphors she uses get darker as the poem advances, the final stanza turning an ashtray filled fag-ends into a dugout filled with dead bodies. With this powerful use of metaphors, Bishop manages to hit the reader with the reality of the alienation from the world outside us, even when surrounded by recognizable objects. “Part of the innovative aspect to Bishop’s poetry lies in the way she places herself outside the boundaries of U.S. constrains, using geographic displacement and cartographic indirection as corollaries to an interplay between psychological manifestation and latency” (Giles 245). This process of defamiliarization of one’s surroundings includes the creation of a false sense of objectivity that is brought in by the poetic voice, who appears to be working towards the unmasking of the territory. As Giles continues to reflect, one of Bishop’s interests was “to rotate cultural landscapes through a hemispheric perspective” as so to be able to see what is like from the other side (246). In proving that writing comes with an inevitable cartographic aspect, she also demonstrates that perspective and the process of perception is related to the feeling of displacement.

5. Conclusions

Although not all of her body of poetry is centered about cartography in the traditional meaning of the word, we can conclude that Elizabeth Bishop’s work is significantly related to it as long as we understand that she is in a constant process of mapping the world and her different realities, putting both of them together in a process very similar to the one a cartographer would follow when representing a territory. It is mostly in the

process of making where we find more similarities between Bishop's poems and maps. *The Map* is one of the best examples found in Bishop's imagery that is able to display both her conception of place and the process she follows for the creation of the poem. Her poetic eye seems to read the map with apparent unawareness of the set of assumptions cartography deals with and translating it to a different form of art that is still not able to hold objectiveness, but this is just the way she tries to express how dreadful it would be to possess one single viewpoint from where to observe the world.

Her absolute relativity of view comes from the continual reexamination of her own knowledge of the world, reexamination that at the same time gives form to a continual sense of readjustment. She blurs the lines that separate physical objects in her poetry while simultaneously providing the reader of details that one does not usually process when looking at reality, separating and connecting things at the same time. And, in presenting such big body of details in her observations, she makes her objects appear unstable yet colorful. She would rather have this unstable imagination that sides with the cartographer's than the pedantry of a historian. Her geographical projections also depend on her memory and on her own relationship with a specific one, and she does not try to as hard to locate herself in time as she does in space.

The meticulous descriptions she likes to work with function in several directions: they trap the reader, forcing a revision of the knowledge one possesses about the world and everyday objects, but it also blurs the limits of perception, being purposefully disorienting at times. This constant revision of knowledge she provokes in the reader and that leads to the defamiliarization of one's surroundings creates a certain sense of objectivity that ought to be flawed, because she does not believe it exists. Her own knowledge of the world comes through means of observation and putting together all the different interpretations of reality she finds reasonable. As if reality was a puzzle, her ultimate goal seems to be to put all the different perspectives together to conform the flimsy reality she is comfortable in.

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