

Study of Perception of Author with Reference to Intertextuality and Sense of Interpretation with Special Reference to Paulo Coelho's *Zahir*

Solanki Anjali Rajendrabhai

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho's novels call into question the nature of the literary text and the act of reading in a post-Einsteinian world. Amidst the debate over his popular writings (Albanese; Ndagano), the discussion turns to whether Coelho continues a poetics of narrative developed by Jorge Luis Borges. This article explores how Coelho's work may depart from a reading of Borges, yet goes beyond it into what Bakhtin established as "the Einsteinian universe applied to literary studies", as posited by Stone (2008). Coelho's work is affected by hypertexts, new ways of connecting and perceiving subjectivities, and cross-cultural pilgrimages. A hermeneutic reading of his novel, *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession* (2005b), allows us to delve into the Coelhoian notion of the *zahir* as a tensional metaphor (Ricoeur) of world-making (Valdes). This underscores the postmodern assumption of the author as just another reader, albeit an ably active one. Through the courageous act of making his reading(s) transparent through writing, he invites other readers into the dialectical presumptions of his world.

1. Introduction

The polemic surrounding the literary work of Brazilian author Paulo Coelho (*Rio de Janeiro*, 1947) calls into question the premises of literature, the nature of the text, and the act of reading in a post-20th century world. Amidst the debate over whether his popular writings can be divided from true literature as opposed to the table mimicry of rhetorical devices and narration (Albanese, 2006, pp. 37-41; Ndagano, 2005, pp. 1-19), the discussion becomes about whether Coelho continues in a line of a poetics of narrative developed by Jorge Luis Borges (*Buenos Aires*, 1899-*Geneva*, 1986), or whether what he does, though it may depart from a reading of Borges, goes beyond it, into what Mikhail Bakhtin established as the Einsteinian universe applied to literary studies, and the release of the writer and the reader from absolute authority of the text. The author will argue that it is in this way of reading Coelho's work, as reader of the world (rather than as writer/reader as fictional world), that his work stands apart from that of Borges and closer to a Bakhtinian conception of the literary adaptation of Einstein's theory of relativity in his epistemology of the novel as posited by Jonathan Stone (2008). This way of reading unveils the writer as "discoverer" (Stone, 2008, p. 409) of the physical reality that can be achieved through a new reading of the world as measurable in subjective realities that juxtapose their positions. In essence, this reading is possible in Coelho in a different way than in Borges, in that in Coelho's work the author is almost erased completely as the initial referent and becomes another reader who shares his readings of texts (such as books of fiction, biblical readings, poetry, popular refrains, and history) and reproducing their echoes.

Although Coelho acknowledges the influence of Borges in his work, it moves in a different direction. Coelho admits that

Borges has greatly influenced my works. I adore his prose and his poetry. I adore everything he has written. I have read his poems a thousand times, and have memorized many of them" (*Gloria*, 2004, pp. 55-56).

Beyond explicit references to Borges in Coelho's novels and interviews, we find many points of contact between the short stories of the Argentine hacedor and the narrations of Paulo Coelho. The main convergences include awareness in the text of the act of reading and the act of writing as stages in a process of discovering the secrets of the universe. Moreover, in the works of both authors the distance between the sacred and the profane traces a trajectory into the search for unity and meaning. The predominant use of allegory and symbol mark a desire to describe a type of Borgian "ultrareality" that is based on the conception of the world as Library (*The Library of Babel*, Borges, 1988, pp. 89-100). In this sense, the intertextuality of sacred texts constructs a textual unity whose intent is to question the potentiality of the word and the reader's creative ability to influence the world. However, in Coelho, this occurs not only by deciphering the meaning of texts, but also by walking in this world and causing changes to it, much as in a dialogic function the nature of the observer affects the measurements of the physical world in Einstein's physics.

In effect, Coelho's readers walk alongside the characters and the narrator/author/character, and read the world directly with their physical senses, and not only through literary texts. These are fused in Coelho, as he moves from "reading" the sky to reading Borges, or other authors, in a heartbeat. This interaction is more subtle than in Borges, whose literary world and the physical reality often collide, as in his short story "El Sur" published originally in *Artificios*, or become plays of memory and philosophical abstractions as in many other stories of *Ficciones* (the first edition of 1971 that combined Borges' two books: *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan* (1941) and *Artificios* (1944), Borges, 1988). However, in Coelho, these worlds never close in on themselves as either pure abstraction and pure memory or simple revelry. Rather they are meant to take the characters and the readers to a deeper understanding of their subjective place in society so that they move ahead in the interaction in the world to a higher level of the achievement of happiness, with a definition that applies to each one's subjectivity.

2. The Zahir and Its Tensional Metaphor of Obsession

In one of his most recently published novels, Coelho makes explicit reference to Borges, not only in the title of the book, *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession* (2005b), but also in the epigraph, a quotation of Faubourg Saint-Pères from the *Encyclopedia of the Fantastic* (1953):

According to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the idea of the Zahir comes from Islamic tradition and is thought to have arisen at some point in the eighteenth century. Zahir, in Arabic, means visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered either a state of holiness or of madness. (as cited in Coelho, 2005b, p. xvii)

This reference to Borges' interpretation of the "Zahir" term, as cited through Faubourg Saint-Pères, guides the reading of the novel's theme of obsession, while also establishing a *mise-en-abyme* of intertextual dialogue with the notion of the Zahir, and with a Borgian literary world and its internal references that define the creative acts of writing/reading. Beyond this, it is not lost on the reader familiar with each author's life and work that this reference to a French author finds correlation to the setting of the majority of Coelho's novel in France, as well as to the connection of *La Ville-lumière* to Borges and as his status of a Latin American writer who spoke French, among other languages, and who had lived in Europe. Coelho presently lives in Paris, and as does his novel's narrator/protagonist, who is also a best-selling novelist.

Borges' short story "The Zahir" was published in 1949, in a collection titled *The Aleph*. The seven-and-a-half page story traces the obsessive thoughts of an unnamed male narrator. Following the death of a woman named Teodelina Villar who he admired from afar, he finds an Argentine 20-cent coin known as the Zahir that emblematically becomes for him everything he desires. Interspersed among his musings about the capital city and the man's life are literary references such as the definition of oxymoron:

The Zahir appears in this commonplace scenario in a Buenos Aires bar after the funeral of the woman in question:

I asked the owner for a brandy and orange juice; among my change I was given the Zahir; I looked at it for an instant, then walked outside into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever (Borges, 1969, p. 244).

Subsequently, he lists other well-known coins of "history and fable" (Borges, 1969, p. 244), thus initiating a trajectory through the darkness and light of his mind, through research and readings, in the search for the meaning of the Zahir.

In Coelho's novel by the same title, the coin does not make an appearance except in the epigraph (although there are many references to the "Favor Bank" that in the final author's note is attributed to Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and a relation could be traced between these). However, the term does operate in the same way: as an emblem of the search for a woman who an unnamed narrator has loved and lost; this loss triggers a search for the meaning of life and love that borders on the obsessive nature of such a quest, and is characterized by many forays into literary references and walks in a capital city (Buenos Aires replaced by Paris, though the Argentine capital is often compared to the

City of Lights). The end of Borges' story heightens the awareness of the "walk" through the night (Borges, 1969, p. 249) in the city, as the means by which he arrives at a deeper spiritual truth:

In the waste and empty hours of the night I am still able to walk through the streets. Dawn often surprises me upon a bench in the Plaza Garay, thinking (or trying to think) about that passage in the *Asrar Nama* where it is said that the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil. I link that pronouncement to this fact: In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis repeat their own name or theninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away; perhaps behind the coin is God. (Borges, 1969, p. 249)

In the novel by Coelho, the search for his wife of 10 years also leads the narrator to a realization of God, or of the transcendence of the need for God into an appropriated experience of the divine presence. At the beginning of the book, the narrator's wife, Esther, "a war correspondent who has disappeared along with a friend, Mikhail, who may or not be her lover" (back jacket, 2005); thus, the bestselling novelist must re-examine his life and face his shortcomings as a husband as he searches for her; this leads him to an acute assessment of his life. In the final chapter of *The Zahir*, we read the following words of this first-person narrator:

The wind had dropped; the trees were listening to what she was saying.

I waited as Penelope waited for Ulysses, as Romeo waited for Juliet, as Beatrice waited for Dante. The empty steppes were full of/memories of you, of the times we had spent together, of the countries we had visited, of our joys and our battles. Then I looked back at the trail left by my footprints and I couldn't see you. (pp. 293-294)

After this, Esther explains to the narrator, her ex-husband, that she had, with difficulty, been able to "forget [her] personal history" and "open... up to the love that is present everywhere" by learning about the Tengri tradition (Coelho, 2005b, p. 294):

One day, I glanced to one side and saw that same love reflected in someone else's eyes, in the eyes of a painter called Dos./I said nothing./ I was still very bruised. I couldn't believe it was possible to love again. He didn't say much [...]. He taught me to love myself rather than to love him. He showed me that my heart was at the service of myself and of God, and not at the service of others. (Coelho, 2005b, p. 294)

This love she discovers becomes the revelation for the narrator and the end of his quest for answers as well.

3. Reality-Making in the Text

Coelho recreates the Borgian intertextual impulse as a creative and inductive act, multiplying the distance from the original source. However, what is prevalent is not a mere use of literary source as reference, but rather an engagement with a literary language developed by Borges for those who are fluent in the paradigms of Babel, as we read in other stories by Borges, such as in his short story "The Library of Babel" (1998, pp. 112-118):

From that point, Borges' first-person narrator sums up the notion of the "infinite" with regards to literature, juxtaposing the library as an infinite "Order", he writes:

I have just written the word "infinite". I have not included that adjective out of mere rhetorical habit; I hereby state that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in some remote place or places the corridors and staircases and hexagons may, inconceivably, end—which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of possible books is not. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited but periodic. If an eternal traveler should journey in either direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope. (Borges, 1998, p. 118)

Borges' use of the Library as "the universe" (Borges, 1998, p. 112), and its architectural description as a metaphor for metaphysical thought, provides a basis for Coelho to perceive and reach out to readers as a shared journey, the reading as rite of passage into truths so obvious they remain hidden from all those who do not seek it through self-awareness. The difference between Borges and Coelho lies in their underlying assumption about the nature of the organizing force at the helm of the universe. In Borges, it is referred to in this short story as:

The work of chance or of malevolent demiurges; the universe, with its elegant appointments—its bookshelves, its enigmatic books, its indefatigable staircases for the traveler, and its water closets for the seated librarian—can only be the handiwork of a god. In order to grasp the distance that separates the human and the divine, one has only to compare these crude trembling symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book with the organic letters inside—neat, delicate, deep black, and inimitably symmetrical. (Borges, 1998, p. 113)

That is, the written word. For Coelho, there is a benevolent force at the core of the universe that is revealed through his search for love in the novel *The Zahir*. As the narrator states midway through the novel:

That meaning went far beyond my marriage: all men and all women are connected by an energy which many people call love, but which is, in fact, the raw material from which the universe was built. This energy cannot be manipulated, it leads us gently forward, it contains all we have to learn in this life. (Coelho, 2005b, p. 145)

Indeed, a reference to Einstein in Coelho's novel comes in relation to the concept of God and possesses several characteristics that is attributable to a Bakhtinian concept of the literary work. Midway through *The Zahir*, the narrator explains this in a way that intertextually recalls Coelho's first book and intertwines his biography with that of the narrator in this novel:

I believe in signs. After I had walked the road to Santiago, everything had changed completely: what we need to learn is always there before us, we just have to look around us with respect and attention in order to discover where God is leading us and which step we should take next. I also learned a respect for

mystery. As Einstein said, God does not play dice with the universe; everything is interconnected and has a meaning. That meaning may remain hidden nearly all the time, but we always know we are close to our true mission on earth when what we are doing is touched with the energy of enthusiasm.

If it is, then all is well. If not, then we had better change direction.

When we are on the right path, we follow the signs, and if we occasionally stumble, the Divine comes to our aid, preventing us from making a mistake. Was the accident a sign? Had Mikhail intuited a sign that was intended for me?

I decided that the answer to these questions was yes. (Coelho, 2005b, pp. 143-144)

In *The Zahir*, the narrator realizes that words are not enough, but that the world's actions upon us also come into play and must be read as signs. While we can try to impose a reading and live by that, there does exist a variable of energy "which many people call love [...] is, in fact, the raw material from which the universe was built" that is "free and wild" (Coelho, 2005b, p. 145). After searching obsessively for his wife for two years, he has written a book *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* as:

When he expresses these thoughts, the narrator-protagonist is in a hospital bed following a near fatal accident. He realizes then that he no longer needs the *Zahir*:

That night, I went to sleep smiling. The *Zahir* was disappearing, and Esther was returning, and if I were to die then, despite all that had happened in my life, all my failures, despite the disappearance of the woman I loved, the injustices I had suffered or inflicted on others, I had remained alive until the last moment, and could, with all certainty affirm: "My day was good, let night fall". (Coelho, 2005b, p. 148)

At this half-way point in the novel, the protagonist has decided to take action to prepare himself to find Esther, now that he himself has attained a deeper understanding of the quest through writing about it.

4. A Quest for Writing Through Interpretation

As in other novels by Coelho, such as *The Alchemist* (*O Alquimista*, his best-selling and most-recognized work of 1988), *The Valkyries* (*As Valkírias*, 1992), *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* (*Na margem do rio Piedra eu sentei e chorei*, 1994), *The Fifth Mountain* (*Quinta Montanha*, 1999), and *Eleven Minutes* (*Onze Minutos*, 2003), the protagonists seek to discover certain truths based on a series of adventures that simulate rites of passage. These paths lead to various regions of the world and end in the return to an inner world of experience and to an understanding of love and God. To achieve this, Coelho, as did Borges, guides his characters by providing cited passages at key moments of the narrative structure, weaving among the actions, the metaphors and resonances gained from the readings of sacred texts and of works by other authors who have also questioned existence in this manner. In *The Alchemist*, we see direct reference to a line of inquiry begun in a short story by Borges entitled, "The Story of Two Dreamers" from *A Universal History of Infamy* (originally published in Spanish in 1935), a collection of diverse fictional narrations. The Argentine writer suggests that these are

“falsifications and distortions” of texts he had read, and which then had nurtured his first attempts at writing (Borges, 1969, pp. 6-7). The first line of the story reveals its source of inspiration: “El historiador árabe El Ixaquí refiere este suceso”, and the rest of the story is placed in quotation. At the end of the text, we find the reference to “(Del Libro de las 1001 Noches, noche 351.)” (Borges, 1969, p. 119). In his prologue to *Universal History* (first edition, as translated by Norman Thomas DiGiovanni), Borges (1972) wrote that: “As for the examples of magic that close the volume, I have no other rights to them than those of translator and reader. Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers” (Borges, 1969, p. 13). This connection to Borges from the beginning of Coelho’s literary trajectory sets in motion the subsequent sense of the text as the creative space; however, his novels are not derivative. Not at all. Indeed what we find in his works, such as in his novel *El Zahir*, is that they maintain is a recognition of previous readings, whereby there is a greater sense of freedom: of a type of reader who is liberated from the tyranny of an absolute writer who has established a pre-determined meaning. Thus the not-knowing is a provocation for dialogue and for there to be a choice in perspective. Coelho lays bare his creative process in *The Zahir*, writing from the voice of the narrator-writer:

Alberto Manguel’s study of Borges’ writing and reading practices and his library penetrate into the poet’s creative process. By extension, we see the traits of this Pythagorean concept of the text—that each text encloses within itself other texts—in Coelho’s works and how this moves beyond the literary text to encompass the living being, moving from living and breathing library to living and breathing being as temple. This provides the basis upon which to comment on literature as a key for ontological meaning production in the sense of what Lisa Block de Behar defines as *interpreterion*, “a mentioning and invoking while negating and leaving behind” (Block de Behar, 2003, p. xiii). Implicit here are the theoretical considerations related to intertextuality, originally elaborated by Julia Kristeva, whose work departed from “the Bakhtin circle” (Goddard, 1993, p. 568) and which has subsequently absorbed other nuances.

What Kristeva proposed in her publications of the later 1960s was that intertextuality supercedes the limits of formalism and structuralism to orient the text toward its socio-historic signification (as opposed to its fixed meaning) in the interaction of various codes, discourses or voices that traverse the text. Interestingly, the author finds that her concept of intertextuality relates more closely to Borges’ work than that of Coelho, especially in that, Bakhtin’s “ideologeme describes sign production (“social intercourse” or “semiotic interaction”) in a specific social reality as the “materialized ideological horizon” (*The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*). Recent scholarship by Jonathan Stone (2008) on the changes or refinements evident in Bakhtin’s 1963 re-working of his original 1929 edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* illuminates what differences there are and what can be taken as continuing in Coelho of Bakhtin’s forward-looking epistemology based on post-Einsteinian paradigms of relativity. Rather, it allows the persistence of another level of unity to be established over the novel than the purely textual, and provides the possibility for not closing the text to pure relativism.

As Stone (2008) suggested, “The presence of relativity, and not relativism, shields Bakhtinian carnival from implying a shirking of moral or ethical responsibilities and shows it to be yet another manifestation of Bakhtin’s celebration of modernity’s shifting perspectives and unbounded subjectivity” (p. 416). However, as in the Bakhtinian concepts of subjective polyphony and the carnivalesque, it remains the contemporary reader’s choice as how to direct the interpretation and interaction of the meaning of the Brazilian writer’s novels.

5. Bakhtin and an Einsteinian Reading of Coelho

In this aspect of bringing us closer to understanding Coelho’s novels, we can use Bakhtin’s intention regarding the relationship of texts to be helpful in citing those interpretations of critics such as Kristeva that followed. In developing interaction into intertextuality, Kristeva significantly changed Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*), which focused on the utterance [by the author] rather than on the text as dynamic milieu of interchange among diverse social speech genres” (Goddard, 1993, p. 568). The term “intertextuality” has undergone several re-interpretations and has come to be used in a synchronic manner, as in Michael Riffaterre, who considers it “the reader’s perception of significance, that is of the literariness of the text” and his “approach to text/production/reception [is] opposed to both deconstruction and historicism by treating the relationship of text to intertext as parallel to that of sign and interpretant in Charles Peirce’s theory of semiosis, which demands an interrelational reading” (Goddard, 1993, p. 570). This discussion adopts the contours of the semiosis defined by Charles Peirce in that intertextuality is located in a hermeneutic process of actualizing the text [and its previously set, inherent meaning] in the act of reading (Goddard, 1993, p. 570).

Within this context, the references to Borges in Coelho’s work allude to what Lisa Block de Behar distinguishes as “a poetics of the very production of meaning [that...] deflate the categorical boundaries between production and reception” (Block de Behar, 2003, p. xi). Thus, the focus is on “the figure of the reader and the reader’s practice in the writings of Borges, and not merely as represented in those writings but, moreover, as presupposed by them” (Block de Behar, 2003, p. xi). Against this background, as William Egginton suggests in his introduction to Block de Behar’s book, *The Passion of an Endless Quotation* (2003), the figure of the quotation looms large in the rhetorical vision (p. xi), and directs the quest of the text. Borges, as Tornielli (2001) suggests:

His endless quotations and reworking of texts reveal this. However, Coelho’s quest is not for the devotion to literariness, but rather as access to recorded codes and solutions garnered from previous quests for meaning, some of which are just as available in direct observation of physical reality. The prime attraction to the book for Coelho is for it to serve as a forum for dialogue, and as the site for the distillation of meaning—a necessary tool in the process of self-awareness.

6. Time and Space as Dialogic-Textual Coordinates

The third point of view on the world of the novel had the same decentering effect on Bakhtin’s early Kantian aesthetics as did Einstein’s introduction of another observer on

a Newtonian physical world. Bakhtin began to use a relativistic worldview in his 1929 invention of polyphony but realized it to be relativistic decades later. When Bakhtin goes to formulate an approach to literary time that hinges on change, multiplicity, and an intimate bonding of space and time, Einstein reemerges in his writing as a key intellectual precursor. Bakhtin's 1937-1938 essay "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel", introducing a literary fusion of time and space in the hybrid idea of a chronotope, is a significant intermediary step between his early and late explications of polyphony (as cited in Stone, 2008, p. 411).

Thus, this is the other key aspect of Bakhtin's proposal to use of Einstein's theory of relativity in literary study, as Stone (2008) suggests:

By stripping Einstein's term of the exclusivity of the mathematical coordinates and translating it from German to Greek, Bakhtin turns Einstein's very specific notion of time supplying the fourth dimensional coordinate on a Cartesian plane into a concept that seems applicable in all spheres of culture. (p. 411)

In both Coelho and Borges, this is apparent, as they fuse fictional and abstract time with real time, and associate them indiscriminately over centuries, and unify them into their reading for answers. The search for meaning is not bound by chronological time or space as absolute coordinates, but rather as positions to be taken and symbols to be interpreted. Yet, this is the position of the reader. Within the text, the space-time coordinates are apparent for the sake of the construction of the literary world. The dividing line, however, becomes more and more dissolved, because the sequence of events becomes more symbolic, rather than having to adhere to a linear notion of reality. For Bakhtin:

The very idea of a chronotope, an appreciation of time that is dependent on the position of the actor, requires a degree of instability that excludes the possibility of absolute time and space. Without a solid scientific foundation, the chronotope is merely an abstract critical term and not the cultural and material reality Bakhtin desired. We see his greater project for the novel—the interweaving of the novelistic world and the real world of the reader—emerging at this point. But it has not fully appeared, and thus this comparison is not bold enough to topple the

distinction between an aesthetic world and the physical world. Instead it binds the two with a rigid parallel existence, formally maintaining this distinction while simultaneously and subtly (in parentheses) beginning to undermine it." "As Holquist argues, Bakhtin does not subscribe to a formalist separation between real time and fictional time. (pp. 115-121; as cited in Stone, 2008, p. 412)

Kant and Einstein [who] function for Bakhtin as two critical ways of understanding the world and are the towering poles between which he moves. [...] By the end of his career he had left part of his Kantian self behind and adopted a more symbiotic view of the real and fictional universes. (Stone, 2008, p. 417)

Stone (2008) concluded that Bakhtin had applied his literary view of 20th-century physics "not to the generation of modernist artists and writers directly influenced by it but retrospectively to all world literature that preceded Einstein" (p. 417).

This lack of concern with the boundaries placed on the evaluation of texts of the past is a reflection of his deep belief in the sanctity of the individual reader's point of view. His abiding interest in viewing a text from this outside perspective is precisely what enables him to shift from a Kantian to an Einsteinian world-view. He elevates and prioritizes readers and in doing so argues for their right to impose their own reality on the artistic worlds they are experiencing. It is the duty of good readers and critics to apply this reality to the text and recognize the coincidence of these worlds. (Stone, 2008, p. 417)

7. Conclusion

In Coelho, the reader is made aware of prior readings and of a correlation between the writer as reader of the universe and Einstein's theories. Coelho takes it further into an analysis of the meaning of a quest that drives his protagonists to travel, to write, and to connect with others. Stone (2008) stated that "Einstein was a great reader of the universe, able to see something hitherto unnoticed. Bakhtin admired such talented readers and strove to be one himself" (p. 417). In *The Zahir*, the references to Einstein are the most explicit, compared to Coelho's other novels. We find, for instance, outright mentions of Einstein in the section mentioned above (midway through the novel), as well as discussions of the idea of energy and its relation to the metaphysical.

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