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## Charting the Future of Translation History

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# Keepers of the Stories

## *The Role of the Translator in Preserving Histories*

Many Canadian readers are familiar with early Aboriginal literature — even that which was produced up until the middle of the last century — only through the “myths and legends” included in school textbooks and anthologies. Although several contemporary Aboriginal writers (many of whom write in English as well as an Aboriginal language, or write exclusively in English) have now claimed a place in English Canada’s literary canon, very few contemporary non-Aboriginal translators approach the early oral literature of the First Nations as anything but a collection of folktales without authors or as examples of the primitive. Robert Bringhurst is a clear exception. His work in translating the master mythtellers of past centuries cannot fail to convince us that literary history needs to be rewritten as well as reread, that just as contemporary European writers can look back to ancient Greek and Roman texts for the roots of genre or form, so also can North Americans trace poetry and fiction back to a classical Aboriginal artistic tradition as rich and varied as European music or

painting. His books integrate poetic translations, retellings of stories and poems transcribed by one ethnographer at the turn of the last century, with exhaustive research on the nature of the civilizations which produced the founding traditions of North American literature — their languages, their artwork, their literatures. In *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (Bringhurst 1999), for instance, he presents over five hundred pages of writing on Haida mythtellers, including more than one hundred pages of notes and appendices. The result is that the literature, rather than being fragmented and decontextualized, is returned to its source culture and examined there, where it belongs and takes on its full meaning, in careful, thoughtful scholarship.

This paper addresses the importance of Robert Bringhurst's work in the context of the history of Aboriginal languages and literature in Canada. The comments presented here focus on some fundamental attitudes that can help translators to understand and to use approaches that ensure the preservation of artistic works and narratives of endangered cultures through translation.

In other research (Elder 2003b and 2003c), I have described some of the roles that translators have played in shaping Canadian culture. As "ambassadors" — sociopolitical agents — academics, and artists or writers, literary translators have contributed to literary history in a wide variety of ways. Through their translations of works that are otherwise not available to or known in the target language, translators have enabled librarians and booksellers to stock their shelves, critics and journalists to fill pages of print, teachers and professors to present the other culture to their students, readers to have access to innovative ideas and practices, and so on.

On the whole, however, while a translated text can generate a number of subsequent metatexts, literary scholars sometimes ignore the influence that literary translators can have, first, on individual creators in the source culture and the target culture, and second, on both literary and social history. In both cases, we often privilege discourse over action and the life of the mind over the real. Robert Bringhurst's work encourages us to view the impact a translator can have on the course of

lived history; moreover, it suggests a translator contributes to history by recording and translating texts written in an endangered language, the expressions of a culture that might (otherwise or still) be lost. Beyond making a contribution to the literary history of the target culture, translated texts have a transformative impact; they change the course of history in unpredictable ways.

### Robert Bringhurst and human literary history

In his moving lecture to the International Federation of Translators, in Vancouver (2002), Robert Bringhurst said, "What I need as a human being is a picture of the whole of human history. What I need as a practising writer is a picture of the whole of human literary history." His paper is of obvious relevance to the theme of this collection of papers, and his title evokes this thematic: "The Future of the Past: Translating Native American Literature into Colonial Tongues."<sup>1</sup> Although it is Bringhurst's work as a translator of Haida Gwaii oral literature that primarily interests me in this study, Bringhurst positions himself in the introductory remarks of his article as a writer. For this reason, and because of the multiple roles literary translators play in shaping history, I want to consider what his translations add to many histories: those of translation, of literary practices, of languages, of culturality and what could be termed the history of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Translators don't always do so, but they may ask themselves some questions of the most fundamental order: for whom, why does one translate? Who has actually translated what, for whom and how? This paper will present different perspectives on the influence of Robert Bringhurst's work on creators and readers, in an attempt to break down some of the cultural generalizations that are hard to resist when we attempt to look at the real under the lens of translation studies. As well, it will cast a passing glance at the reciprocal influence of literary translation and other artistic fields. The aim is to put the body of work created by Bringhurst and other writer-translators into a larger historical context and to remind us that literary translators are practising artists,

that their work needs to be examined as literature, and not simply as texts documenting cultural history.

Having considered interactions of history and translation, we know there is great value in adding the stories that Bringhurst has set into circulation through his translation to literary history. However, he specifies that he needs — and the articulation of need is also rich — *human* literary history. In part, his use of the term human history refers to the importance of people's history or "la petite histoire." His phrase "the whole of human literary history" certainly suggests the need for inclusivity. However, the implication of human history goes beyond a need to inscribe the work of minority writers and "particularist" texts into a larger whole of literary history.<sup>3</sup> His translations have an impact on the lives of individuals and collectivities who speak the source language as well as the target language.

### The translator's body of work

Bringhurst's modesty is one of the things that has contributed to the fact that his translation work, as a whole, has not been examined carefully. In any case, the work of writer-translators does not generally receive the sustained attention of scholars or critics. Certainly the creative process of a literary translator, so similar to that of a writer in any genre, is not often discussed. Different translators approach their work in different ways, emphasizing one or another aspect not only in one work, in a strategy of preserving the integrity of the work, but often in many works they translate. Translators may work closely with one author, adopting and adapting similar practices; they may prefer a school, period or group of writers, or they may sustain particular stylistic approaches, for instance preferring Latinate forms to Germanic alternatives or focussing on cadence, as the late Fred Cogswell often did, or rather attempt to reconstruct the creative process of the author and re-establish patterns of repetition, word-play, images, and the like, as I do.<sup>4</sup>

Translation is one of the best ways to bring new life to old literary traditions, but the line between original writing and imported transla-

tions seems to be almost as impermeable as some of the other dams we build around our notions of art and literature. A figure like Robert Bringhurst challenges several of these notions, and this is not only because challenges are inherent in the academic perspective into which translations fall, being subject to distinct modalities of reception. When a translation becomes popular, the fact that it is a translation and/or an importation is generally erased by canonical streamlining techniques.<sup>5</sup> That Robert Bringhurst's translation work is widely known outside of translation circles and remains read as a translation is therefore of interest to those interested in reception patterns. On the other hand, Bringhurst's authorship is equally highlighted; because of his research and the fact that his translations of several writers appear together in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, for instance, his name is the only one on the cover. Immediately, though, the names of the Haida storytellers appear in the text, those names almost entirely lost to human memory. Bringhurst is the writer who has taken down and studied the literature of the "classical Haida mythtellers." In a sense, he is creating the history he is documenting. Moreover, the combination of popularity and erudition in Bringhurst's work pushes Canadian culture's tendency to merge popular and critical audiences to an extreme.

Because Bringhurst was first known as a poet, the reader may ask why he would have chosen to translate Haida Gwaii myths. In other places and periods, however, translation is recognized as being a way for a writer to develop new practices in his own creative work, as well as adding new forms to the literary traditions of the target culture, thereby influencing literary history in multiple ways: by introducing source texts and writers into target culture, influencing writers in the target culture, putting ideas and cultural references into circulation in the target culture, and both circulating different (and therefore new) literary practices and developing new ways of translating literature, since each work demands a slightly different approach.

One of Bringhurst's accomplishments is in asserting the role of the translator as writer and the writer as translator. This changes, sensibly, his position in history, by presenting literary history as one in which the

translator plays a fundamental role, and one which is interrelated but not interchangeable with the history of ideas.

### Reshaping, restoring, retrieving histories

In both literary history and the history of ideas, Bringham's work challenges perceptions. Who is translating, who is speaking for whom? Whose ideas are these, and what is the relationship between culturality, spirituality and the imaginary? How much of each is preserved, rendered, created in translation? What is the source of the source text? The translations are not imported, but neither are they transferred between the official languages. Far from migrant, far from another land, this is the literature of our own first peoples. His work contradicts what we believe about the domestication and popularization of translation, and about the parallel models of Canadian culture.

Bringham's work in translation implicitly articulates the value of translation in terms of survival: the importance of keeping the stories, the language, the culture alive. His translations can be seen as an act of preservation, a rescue. The threat of disappearance is never too far from the mind of the translator as he performs his work. And the threat is, perhaps, more real than we care to think.

One of the gravest threats to this picture of human literary history that Bringham says he needs, and that we all need as human beings, is the loss of languages, literatures and cultures. The threats are not simply those of waning interest, prestige, transmission from one generation to the next or the ability to communicate with a larger number of people. When a language is threatened and a culture is marginalized, when a group of people do not have access to power or privilege, these losses are often accompanied by lost and missing lives. The tellers of the stories, their ways of telling, are threatened by the same things that threaten language: war, conquest, genocide, extinction, holocaust. When one group exerts cultural dominance over another, there are also threats to individual freedom and security: assimilation, censorship, tyranny and simple ignorance. We have only to think of the execution

of individual translators to be reminded that the invisibility of the translator has significance beyond the conventional and academic or rhetorical questions we examine in articulating intellectual and literary history.

Bringhurst's approach to history is that it is "a problem — one that translation could help to clarify, and possibly even to solve." (11) In contrast, he states that, for him, translation "has always been a method of exploration: less a way of solving problems than of trying to find out roughly what the problems are." (11) His translations may be solutions, but they are possible solutions to the challenges of history rather than of language. But among the problems of history are the ways it annihilates languages and eliminates stories. Translators keep the old stories, bring them to new eyes, create a new gaze to see old relics and dead bodies, and make stories new again. Bringhurst points out that when the European invasion began, about five hundred different languages were spoken in the Americas, including approximately sixty-five in what is presently Canada. (12) This reminder is an appropriate one as New Brunswick celebrated, in 2004, the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Europeans to Wabanaki (which will be followed by 2005's commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Deportation). It suggests that we all have a role to play in preserving the languages and cultures of our First Nations peoples as well as the two official languages. Preserving may be the wrong word, however. "Languages . . . are not static," writes Robert Bringhurst. "They are born and die, like species of plants and animals. They also move around, and sometimes they get pushed around, and sometimes they are pushed to the brink of extinction." (12) The statement may sound matter of fact, but Bringhurst's statement is accompanied by a dramatic illustration. He points out that in a large section of the map that illustrates his paper there is a white space, where languages died before any written record was made. The blank record is a rich image, evoking sterility and absence. It does not, however, convey the blackness of death or evil, or the drops of red, marks of the indigenous, the feminine, and the loss of human life.



### Keeper of the language

Keeping languages alive is a matter of protecting the people who speak them. The safe-keeping of stories, spiritual teachings, sacred objects is essential to the protection of First Nations peoples. Bringham presents the role of the translator in phrasing that is not inconsistent with the First Nations' view of cultural exchange. "When I [translated], I relished every instant of the labour and felt that the gift I had been given, the experience I'd gained, was greater than whatever I had given in return." (11) In this way, he can be understood as being the "ideal reader" and thus the ideal translator of First Nations literature.

Bringham brings to his translations of Haida Gwaii texts respect, understanding of the spiritual meanings of words, and the recognition of the value of the gift he has been given. Without these, translators can only add to the white spaces between unidentified bodies and unheard voices.

By writing down and translating stories, translators give voice to individual people who are otherwise silenced, marginalized, and excluded. They find, retrieve, rescue, and revive stories and poetry that lie outside of our literary and historical traditions, as well as the practices and aesthetics that make them literary texts. But rather than simply preserving culture, they are also keeping people alive. Without stories, languages and then cultures disappear. A diminished culture takes down with it individual victims of problems of health, abuse, and despair. Unless a people is creating its own artwork, telling its own stories, writing its own literature, it will disappear.

While academics and critics warn against theft or appropriation by a dominant culture, Bringham suggests that allowing a literature or a language to die out is a far more serious loss.

The best way to steal a people's history, culture and language is by *not* trying to learn it, replacing it blindly with a history, culture and language of your own. Learning someone's language, someone's culture, someone's history, reinforces it. It is not an act of theft; it is an act of recognition and acknowledgement, like learning someone's name. It's

an indispensable act of respect — for societies and for individuals too. (Bringhurst 2006, 20)

A translator who learns to read or communicate with artists in their language is working against assimilation in various ways. Bringhurst's translations offer creative ways of restoring and preserving elements of the source text, by textualizing recognition and respect. In *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, for instance, he not only compares the Haida poet Ghandl to Homer and the author of *Beowulf*, but he provides copious notes and explanations about the importance of the contributions to literary history made by the Haida Gwaii writers he has selected. Even presenting and translating as "oral narrative poems" (ibid., 27) a body of work so often dismissed as "myths and legends" emphasizes the literary value of the text rather than its importance as a document. Then, in the presentation of Skaay's "Sleek Blue Beings," Bringhurst enters from time to time as a respectful member of the audience, a receiver of spiritual knowledge, rather than an originator:

[Skaay] was unfolding his own vision of the world by speaking in mythological terms . . . Words are a means of rediscovery and rebirth instead of repetition. Skaay continues now, from where we interrupted him (Bringhurst 1999, 242).

As mentioned earlier, the fact that the name of the mythteller is given is important; authorship is attributed to the teller, here. And even more significant perhaps is Bringhurst's decision to provide names for places and people in the Haida language. As Bringhurst acknowledges:

. . . except in a few cases where I know the individuals or their communities would disapprove, I use people's indigenous personal names: Skaay instead of John Sky; Daxhiigang rather than Edenshaw; Kilxhawgins, not Abraham Jones. I know most readers of the book will find the Haida and other native names harder to spell, remember and pronounce (1999, 17).

But the reason is more than a desire to foreignize. It is, instead, “an essential gesture of respect and recognition — one I hope most readers of this book will also want to make” (Bringhurst 1999, 242). Through the use of this authorial voice, Bringhurst takes the classical translator’s preface and elaborates a scholarly discourse. But this ethnography is, literally, a “well-versed” approach, clearly subordinate to poetics and linguistics.

As well as using this scholarly voice to help the reader learn the language, Bringhurst also does so through lengthy footnotes about the nuances of meaning and the historical backdrop of the story being told. Haida text is included and examined. For instance, on page 251, Bringhurst provides the Haida text and the literal translation of a passage, preserving the syntax and compound words. This gives us: “Then \* thus \* him \* he \* talking-acting \* him-to \* he \* grasping-handling-the \* when / Me \* here\* \* are. / That-there \* too \* you \* are.” It is obviously a foreignizing strategy, and Bringhurst’s intentions seem to go beyond the *dépaysement* of the reader. He wants to teach them how to read not only this ancient language but the way translation works. He continues, “This, again, is the working translation: As he handed him these, he said to him, / “You are me. You are that, too.” (ibid., 252). “Again,” because Bringhurst has presented these lines a few pages earlier. The reader is called to be a listener (this is Bringhurst’s description, in his opening words, of what he has done as a scholar and translator). There is repetition, both in an incantatory tone to echo the storytelling, and in a didactic mode to remind us about what we are doing and what the language is doing. The passage Bringhurst chooses to expound on the “stylistic idiosyncracies” of Skaay seems to me to be one of incredible complexity. (251) For, after all, we are the listeners, as Bringhurst is the listener, and, at the same time, we are the actors and perhaps even the mythtellers of our own lives. “You are me. You are that, too.” And the “that” (later, “those are the things of which he was speaking”) invites us to explore, to come to our own conclusions: are “those” ravens, or something more, something of another world? Bringhurst, as translator, prefers to lead us through deeper levels of complexity rather than to provide a fixed, clear meaning.

Bringhurst recognizes the position in which he is placed, the potential for harm and damage that can be done when a recording is transcribed, capturing a telling and freezing it in time, and he reminds us of our position outside of these cultures. Another of his textual strategies is to create incantatory repetitions, such as using “they say” at the end of sentences several times throughout a long work to remind us that this is an oral performance and that it is someone else who is speaking. The translator is placed in the position of listener, but then listeners may tell the story anew. Each telling, each translation is different. Bringhurst presents translation, like history, as a dilemma: “I propose, in keeping that principle, a simple two-part thesis — or dilemma, as you please: 1. There is nothing that can be translated perfectly, but 2. There is nothing that cannot be translated.”

### Keeping the stories safe

The translation needs to remain a work foreign, in important ways, to our experiences. It is up to us to stretch to understand, and not up to the translator to tell us. Bringhurst writes, “. . . there is a sense in which, even to read or hear the translation, you still have to learn another language.” Later, addressing the idea of appropriation (or translation as genocide) (14), he talks about the protective effects of foreignizing ourselves:

Instead of translating *from* the Navajo, we must translate ourselves *into* Navajo. We should not be ‘anglicizing’ the works but ‘navajoizing’ their potential readers. That in fact is what genuine translators and translations tend to do (Bringhurst 2006, 21).

Developing the capacity to become readers (or listeners) of these translations is a demanding task. Our familiarity with work by First Nations and writers from other cultures often comes first from anthologies, which removes the works from context but also from the voice of the individual writer. Bringhurst considers that textbooks and anthologies

transmit stereotypes and give no "sense of the enormous and creative contribution that individual mythtellers . . . make to their own traditions" (17). The stylistic and aesthetic choices made by Bringhurst do not facilitate a straightforward reading of the text, but rather present themselves as signposts of the distance between the source and target cultures.

One of the elements that Bringhurst is determined to preserve in his translation is what he calls the "animatedness" of the work. Everything is alive, everything is personified. Looking at the roots of "animated" (16) — breath and life, of course, but also spirit — it is easy to see the similarity of Bringhurst's mission to that of the first translators of the Bible. The spiritual dimension of the artist's work presents it as a mission — but of preservation of the belief system rather than of conversion.

Another point that Bringhurst makes is about the interconnectedness of forms of art. He writes, "Strange as it may sound, I think that, for outsiders, maybe the best preparation there is for learning to listen to the masterworks of classical Haida literature is learning to listen to European classical music." Later, he likens oral literature to jazz and painting. Earlier, he suggested looking at sculpture as a preparation for listening to myths.<sup>6</sup> By writing down the stories and translating the literature of other cultures, however, translators not only enable other artistic traditions to survive and even flourish, they also keep them safe from extinction. Whether the texts and tales be those of the indigenous people in Canada or of "others," including those writers who have immigrated because of intolerable conditions and those who continue to live under the threat of death, the act of preserving literature is a gesture not unlike providing shelter or amnesty. The act of literary translation is a small but significant gesture towards the continuance and furtherance of peoples in danger of being eliminated, towards the survival of people whose lives, as well as whose work, may be lost to us, whether because of the grand tragedies of History or through the neglect and exclusion of the individuals whose lives make up the people's history.

As we look at the future of history, we are struck by the climate of the times in which we live, in which change is occurring rapidly and more and more of the "natural" remnants of culture are being destroyed by, for

instance, new media, globalizing technologies, conflicting rights, and the figurative and literal closings of borders. In such a climate, certain forms, practices and words become threatened by and threatening to dominant culture. The translator is placed on a bridge that could be blown up at any moment, and must choose whether to render the unspeakable, discover ways to translate the untranslatable, and endeavor to give voice to the silent and the silenced.

The reasons we are called to translate are no more trivial than this: we translate to preserve life and history. Bringhurst writes,

The clearest and most universal reason to study and translate Native American oral literature is that it's part of the human testament, part of the accumulating map of the human mind and the human experience, part of our own species' natural history. For many of us, though, there is a further reason, found in the conjunction of self and subject: this is the place where we were born. (Bringhurst 2006, 20)

Robert Bringhurst's work can have consequences that we can only begin to imagine. In reading his translation of these poetic stories, in which the threat of loss is articulated textually as well as paratextually, we cannot help but be reminded that we are living in times that are hard to understand, in which the artist's voice seems to fall silent or on deaf ears. More importantly, the dimensions of horror are such that governments try to ban photos of bodies and the media censors our television screens.

If these acts were in the interest of preventing us from being desensitized, or to protect the privacy of the individual victims, they could be viewed with less skepticism. Human rights activists have made it clear, however, that we *need* to know. We need more information, more contact, more freedom of movement and speech, more access — not to information as much as to ways of understanding what the seemingly discrete and bizarre catastrophies might mean at some level that at once connects us and welcomes our differences.

The suggestion that the work of art is alive, animated, reminds us

that it comes from the physical gestures of a creator who is or who has been alive. These stories are the expression of a person, as well as of a people. The humanity of the original creator, while protected by Bringhurst's discretion and respectful difference, is one of the essential guidelines of Bringhurst's translation work. It seems to me that it is the relationship between the author and the translator that is the greatest indicator of whether the culture is being preserved or appropriated. Protect the storyteller, respect the keeper, and the stories will also be safe from harm. This also implies that appropriation is simply another metaphor, and a diminished one, for the loss and neglect of human life. Our academic and pedagogical attention to questions such as authority and plagiarism needs to be informed by a recognition — by *our* recognition — that there are greater, more desperate and more urgent issues to be resolved in our real, individual lives.

Work from another culture that lies beyond the limits of our understanding needs to be brought into our range of vision through a series of literary practices and a base of understanding. At the same time, as Doris Sommer (1999) and other specialists of particularist writing remind us, we should not simply assume that this work is meant to come into our grasp, that we are entitled to have access to it. As readers, as writers, we, like the translator evoked but not described by Bringhurst, are here to bear witness to that which would otherwise remain invisible through neglect rather than through mindful protection. Bringhurst writes that what is missing from many versions, many false testimonies, is what he calls translation, "the honesty and fidelity that translators are duty-bound to provide." (20) This false testimony, this stolen and misunderstood knowledge, is what is really theft and broken promises.

Although I am certain that it is not his intention or even his hope — Bringhurst is an artist, and not an ambassador or a spokesperson — his work has the result of preserving, rendering and creating humanity. The reader and the writer who are moved by his work are not only creating meaning, they are also becoming more human.

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## Notes

1. Robert Bringhurst. (2006). "The Future of the Past: Translating Native American Literature into Colonial Tongues". In *ellipse: Canadian Writing in Translation*, no. 76, Winter 2005-06). All references to this article are included in the text.
2. Among Bringhurst's translations of First Nations (oral) literature are *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (Bringhurst 1999) and *The Raven Steals the Light* (Bringhurst and Reid 1984), which is only in part a translation. He wrote this book in 1984 with Bill Reid, who was a bilingual (and biracial) Haida-English artist. Bringhurst also translates from classical languages, and intersperses various languages in his own poetry.
3. The term "particularist" is taken from and defined according to the important work of Doris Sommer in *Proceed With Caution, When Engaging Minority Writing in the Americas* (Sommer 1999).
4. In my introduction to *Ellipse* issue number 68, dedicated to Fred Cogswell's work, I cite the example of apostrophes ("labyrinth's heart") and hyphens ("sea-wind") used by Cogswell in both writing and translating in order to preserve the cadence. (8). An example of my own concern for preserving repetitions is the fact that I tend to translate a word by the same English word whenever possible ("regard" by "gaze" throughout a work) rather than using alternatives ("look," "glance," or something similar). I also try to work as the author does, whether it is in translating ten verses a day when the author has written ten, or translating an entire collection if the first draft was written quickly.
5. This is very true of translations of Quebec literature, such as those of Gabrielle Roy's, Roch Carrier's and Michel Tremblay's works, which have become part of "English" Canada's literary canon. "The history of translation should go further. It should also find a place for non-Canadian texts that have become, to a certain extent, part of Canada's literary polysystem" (Blodgett 1983, 28). Often, modifications are made to render possible the entry into the canon; they include, of course, various methods of erasing the marks of the translation, both through the manipulation of the language and the practice of reading translations (see Venuti 1995).
6. "Every accomplished performance is a reinvention of the work. In this respect, Native American oral literature is a lot like another kind of music. It's a lot like jazz. You can write a new jazz tune if you want to, but if it's any good, it will sound as if it's old. And there is no great need to write new tunes, because, of course, there is an infinite number of unexhausted ways to play the tunes we already have. And almost any tune can be *converted* into jazz if a jazz musician plays it. . . . European painting worked this way as well, in its greatest days, during the Renaissance and the Baroque. In those



days, European painting was primarily a means of retelling and revitalizing myths. No one asked Bellini or Mantegna or Michelangelo or Titian to invent a new story" and "if you've grown up in the world of European or Asian literature, you have to learn the language of Native American narrative, and some of the language of Haida culture. . . ." (16). "And it will help, of course, to look at some Haida art. A lot of lovely works of sculpture from these villages are now on display in museums in Vancouver and Seattle, Ottawa and Washington, New York, Paris, London and Berlin" (14). Bringhurst (2006)

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