

Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and Phillips's Nash in *Crossing the River*: A Discursive Approach

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According to Helen Tiffin, “The project of post-colonial literatures [is] to investigate the European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space and to intervene in that originary and continuing containment.” She explores, in this respect, what she calls “the canonical counter-discourse,” an approach whereby “a postcolonial writer takes up the character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post colonial purposes.”¹ This *modus operandi* is familiar through texts like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Sam Selvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975), which respond respectively to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). In *Crossing the River* (1993), Caryl Phillips opts, among other techniques, for this “discursive strategy,”² and engages in a revision of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). In what follows I will only be concerned with the first part of Phillips's novel, “The Pagan Coast,” in which the journey motif is very similar to that in Conrad's novella. The issue I want to pursue pertains to the discursive dialectic that the British-Caribbean writer establishes in connection to the Conradian text. I will concentrate on Phillips's Nash Williams in relation to Conrad's Kurtz, and explore the ‘going native’ question. My aim is to show how Phillips appropriates and deconstructs the assumptions of colonial fiction.

In both *Heart of Darkness* and *Crossing the River*, the voyage to Africa followed by the journey into the interior proceeds from the

¹ Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 97.

² Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,” p. 97.

common wish to recover a missing person, who eventually dies. In Conrad's novella, throughout the whole voyage up river, Marlow frantically clings to the idea of Kurtz as "an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle"³ whom, he, the hero-sailor, is going to free from the captivity of the wilderness. In the same way, in "The Pagan Coast," Edward's main purpose in journeying to Monrovia is to recover "his Nash Williams,"⁴ who is his former slave. Yet, ironically enough, it is not these similarities that essentially connect the two texts. It is rather in differences that the Conradian novella and the Phillipsian narrative meet, namely in the intricate and least probable connection between Conrad's Kurtz and Phillips's Nash. In view of their opposed identities, Kurtz being a white colonial agent and Nash a black African slave, the two characters seem irreconcilable. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that in "The Pagan Coast" Nash Williams is portrayed, up to a certain point, as a kind of double to Conrad's Kurtz.

Both characters are envoys of the West to Africa, but most significantly, they represent the ethnocentric colonial mindset when confronted with an unfamiliar surrounding. Although we do not have direct access to Kurtz's voice, except momentarily at the end of the novella, the agent's report or pamphlet to the "Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" is rich in revelations. The seventeen-page communiqué speaks with "vibrating [...] eloquence" about the African natives' perception of white men as "supernatural beings" (*HD*, p. 83) and deities. Then, unexpectedly, the Conradian agent blows the rhetoric away and scrawls his famous note at the foot of the last page: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (*HD*, p. 84).

Kurtz's extremist stance is perfectly illustrative of the general fear and loathing of the peoples of Africa in the European imperialist era. In the nineteenth century, the post-Darwinian stipulation that the native Africans were 'savages' had replaced the Enlightenment's outwardly benevolence for the 'primitives' in captivity. Such ethnocen-

³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; London: Penguin, 1995), p. 72. Further references to this edition will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation *HD*.

⁴ Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 69. Further references to this edition will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation *CR*.

tric ideas meant, to quote Edward Said, that “independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled”⁵ because, as Frantz Fanon argues ironically, “the Negro is an animal, [...] the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly.”⁶ This standpoint was further developed in the twentieth century by Francis Galton, the founder of the Eugenics movement, who encouraged the procreation of people ‘of superior stock,’ presumably white people, and devised psychological measurements to demonstrate the intellectual inferiority of the black race.⁷ My point, in this regard, is that, for all its conciseness, Kurtz’s note encapsulates this pre-colonial, colonial, and sometimes post-colonial belief in the innate superiority of the white man and in the inborn savagery of his black counterpart. From an essentialist pro-imperial perspective, civilization is solely a Western product. Outside the West, the globe is populated by ‘brutes,’ who, in the absence of a leading Kurtz, must be exterminated.

What is essentially ironic, and somewhat unusual, is the embodiment of these ideas in Nash Williams, the African protagonist of “The Pagan Coast” in *Crossing the River*. In fact, although he views Liberia as “a fine place to live in” where “a colored person can enjoy his liberty” (*CR*, p. 18), Nash, a black man and a former slave, replicates in Africa what Gail Low calls “the manicheanism of [the] colonial mindset.”⁸ He manifests his loathing for the “uncivilized” (*CR*, p. 19) natives, whom, as he judges, “are a much-maligned people,” (*CR*, p. 31) who “can be very savage when they think they have the advantage” (*CR*, p. 32). He even questions his affiliation to the African race and finds it “strange to think that these people of

⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; London: Vintage, 1994), p. 26.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 324.

⁷ Russell Grigg, “Eugenics... Death of the Defenceless: The Legacy of Darwin’s Cousin Galton,” *Creation Magazine* 28.1 (December 2005), pp. 18-22. *Creation Ministries International*, <http://creation.com/eugenics-death-of-the-defenceless> (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁸ Gail Low, “‘A Chorus of Common Memory’: Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*,” *Research in African Literatures* 29.4 (Winter 1998), p. 133.

Africa are called [his] ancestors, for with some of them you may do all you can but they still will be your enemy” (*CR*, p. 32). In his own words, Africa is a “land of darkness” (*CR*, p. 25) and an “asylum” (*CR*, p. 26) when compared to America, the unique “home,” to which he would like to return “as soon as possible” (*CR*, p. 35). It is true that Nash’s last letter reverses the ethnocentric logic of his earlier days, but I shall analyze this in due time. My main contention here is that, when returned to Africa, Nash behaves as a Western outsider just like an Edward, a Marlow or a Kurtz on a visit to Africa. From this perspective, Nash also resembles what Rudy, the protagonist of “The Cargo Rap” in *Higher Ground* (1989), another novel by Phillips, calls the “professional [slave]”⁹ who was “malprogrammed in a hostile and alien culture.”¹⁰ Nash further evokes Malcolm X’s “old type” or “Uncle Tom,” who, as the political leader puts it in a 1963 speech, “wants to be turned white so he can go to heaven with a white man.”¹¹

Phillips’s Nash and Conrad’s Kurtz approach Africa with the ethnocentric stereotypes entertained in the West in the nineteenth century. Both characters are also portrayed as gifted products of Western civilization, another feature they have in common. According to C.B. Cox, Conrad’s agent, an emissary of enlightenment and progress, “travelled to Africa to campaign for the ideal.”¹² He is a painter, a writer, and a political orator, who is often described, even by his enemies as “the best agent,” “an exceptional man,” (*HD*, p. 43) “a gifted creature,” and a “pulsating stream of light” (*HD*, p. 79). The repute that Kurtz has established for himself as an exceptionally efficient manager reconciles all European agents in the Conradian novella. Yet, interlocked with these stipulations of fame is the less stressed idea of Kurtz’s naivety, a feature that I would like to discuss in connection with Nash, and which spells out a dire message for the reader’s evaluation of the so-called geniuses in both texts. According

⁹ Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground* (1989; London: Viking, 1999), p. 73.

¹⁰ Phillips, *Higher Ground*, p. 64.

¹¹ *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), p. 29.

¹² C.B. Cox, *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination* (London: J.M. Dent, 1974), p. 55.

to Kurtz, then: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (*HD*, p. 58). If expressed by an average middle-class British citizen of the nineteenth century, this statement would be acceptable because of the general pro-imperial inclination of the period. But that a gifted intellectual, who had been elected to do colonial work in view of his erudite qualities and deep understanding of colonial reality articulates his belief in the possible reconciliation of the ivory trade with the ideal of enlightenment is revelatory. Kurtz is betrayed here by his own discourse, which exposes him as a naive character, whose mind readily endorses contradictions when it comes to Africa. His simplistic amalgamation of the humanitarian concept of aid with the far less humanitarian activity of colonial trade and enslavement might lead one to argue that the so-called 'gift' is after all not that gifted. He is simply a reflection of the general naive mindset of many nineteenth-century Europeans. Most people were, in fact, convinced that their nations' invasion of unknown places could have beneficial repercussions on the indigenous communities of those remote, uncivilized and still unmapped territories.

Significantly, the notion of intellectual superiority also applies to Phillips's Nash Williams in "The Pagan Coast." Edward's decision to consent to his slave's migration to Africa stems from his high appreciation of the servant's "unswerving application," "Christian education, and [...] sound moral character" (*CR*, p. 7). Nash's reputation as an exceptional slave is all the clearer in the text as there are obvious references to the "remarkable" (*CR*, p. 12) and "virtuous" (*CR*, p. 11) servant, who "had been an inspiration to priests and educators alike," (*CR*, p. 7) and who has successfully secured for himself the title of "prime candidate" (*CR*, p. 9) for the repatriation mission.

However, if placed against the character's exaggerated optimism for the outcome of his African journey, Nash's reputation for being blessed with an exceptionally "*fair mind*" (*CR*, p. 11) becomes slightly discordant, in that it illustrates his complete naivety as to the possibility of a return to Africa, when, in his case, there is no recorded memory of a precedent departure and loss. Born in America, the manumitted slave has never experienced any form of geographical displace-

ment as the first generation of African slaves did. Nash's inflated confidence in the outcome of his African migration duplicates, in this regard, that of many Afrocentrists or Afro-idealists, who have no knowledge of African life, language and situation in general, and are convinced, in the vein of Rudy in *Higher Ground*, that the only approved site where the displaced black race can ultimately heal the scars of its past is Africa.

Phillips's characterization of the manumitted slave seems initially mimetic, in the sense that it appears to reproduce aspects of the Conradian character and pre-text wholesale without any element of interrogation and subversion. Yet, in "The Pagan Coast," the Phillipsian narrative goes beyond a mere dependence on Conrad's text. It allows Nash Williams, a black man and a former slave, to tell about his own experience, which is inconceivable in the ethnocentric construction of Marlow's discourse in *Heart of Darkness*. Phillips's narrative also sheds light upon the 'going native' issue, which caused many critics to disagree in their analysis of Kurtz's fall into atrocity.

Indeed, a crucial concern in *Heart of Darkness* is that of the fall of the Western agent into despotism and murder, which some critics described as Kurtz's degeneration and fall to "the enemy within,"¹³ while others readily viewed as the result of his 'going native.' The text speaks, rather, of "the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness that seemed to draw [Kurtz] to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts" (*HD*, pp. 106-107). "The wilderness had patted [him] on the head" (*HD*, p. 81). It "had driven [Kurtz] to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, [and] the drone of weird incantations," (*HD*, p. 107) to take "a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (*HD*, p. 81). How could he escape, "by Jove!" (*HD*, p. 82). Throughout the whole journey up-river, Marlow leaves us suspended in a dream-like atmosphere, anticipating Kurtz's apparition and the resolution of the mystery that lies behind his disappearance in Africa. We think we are about to meet the Conradian agent at last. But instead, we are delivered with these elusive references about how he

¹³ Ian Watt, "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Critics," *Essays on Conrad*, ed. Ian Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 91.

succumbs to the temptation of a quasi-unsubstantial wilderness. Perhaps the chief problem of *Heart of Darkness*, in the words of Albert J. Guerard, is that it “suggests and dramatizes evil as [...] vacancy.”¹⁴ The reader cannot definitely state that something concrete, an event, a menace, or a person triggers Kurtz's retreat into the interior and his yielding to acts of violence. In fact, the only solid information we get about the character's acts of transgression comes through a slow and circuitous process of discoveries. Marlow leaps from one vague fact to the other to ultimately produce the unique concrete proof of Kurtz's descent into barbarism. Through his binoculars, he describes the agent's “posts [...] ornamented with round carved balls” (*HD*, p. 86), which are actually human skulls. These and the savagery of murder they imply are the result of the terrible ascendancy that the European agent gained over the natives of his station. Kurtz's domination is derived from his presumed power of divinity. Indeed by playing god in the remote kingdom of terror that he has established for himself far from Europe, he exceeds all the limits of his supposedly civilizing mission.

Two main orientations, which are by no means exclusive, emerge out of the considerable amount of discussions and writings that has been produced with regard to Kurtz's fall. Albert J. Guerard, James Guetti, K.K. Ruthven, Lionel Trilling and Caryl Phillips himself examine Kurtz's fall from a psychological point of view. Others, like Frances Singh and Indira Ghose, posit Kurtz's “tribalization,”¹⁵ that is his ‘going-native,’ or turning to “the lawless jungle,”¹⁶ as a central aspect of the Conradian journey in *Heart of Darkness*. I shall first examine the arguments that these two groups pursue, and then focus on Phillips's response to Kurtz's fall in “The Pagan Coast.”

K.K. Ruthven sees Kurtz as a Faustian figure whose retreat into the interior of the African wilderness is “an act of penetration to the most ancient chore of the European mind,” “something in the nature of a psychic voyage into the innermost recesses of the mind, to

¹⁴ Albert J. Guerard, “The Journey Within,” *Conrad: Heart of Darkness, Nostromo and Under Western Eyes*, ed. C.B. Cox (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 51.

¹⁵ Frances Singh, “The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*,” *Conradiana* 10 (1978), p. 49.

¹⁶ Singh, “The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*,” p. 43.

a point at which European morality has not even begun to operate.”¹⁷ Trilling develops a similar approach, in that he treats Kurtz as “a hero of the spirit,” “who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul.”¹⁸ This view is also shared by James Guetti and Caryl Phillips, for whom the fall is a “journey that Kurtz undergoes as he sinks down through the many levels of the self to a place where he discovers unlawful and repressed ambiguities of civilization.”¹⁹

In February 1975, Chinua Achebe delivered one of the most influential lectures in post-colonial literary discourse; it was entitled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” In this lecture, the African critic and writer declared Conrad “a bloody racist”²⁰ and dismissed *Heart of Darkness* as a “deplorable book.”²¹ I will not enter the critical debates that offer themselves here. Instead, I want to focus on Achebe’s fierce condemnation of the psychological interpretation of Kurtz’s fall into atrocity. This, according to him, reduces Africa to “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity”²² and a mere setting of negation for “the breakup of one petty European mind.”²³

In my opinion, what Achebe condemns, namely the reading of Kurtz’s fall as psychological breakdown, is the very argument that saves the image of the African in *Heart of Darkness*. By attacking this psychic interpretation, the Nigerian critic implicitly supports the second tendency in the analysis of Kurtz’s fall, namely the ‘going native’ or the ‘tribalization’ thesis. Sustained by critics such as Frances Singh and Indira Ghose, this approach suggests a contamina-

¹⁷ K.K. Ruthven, “The Savage God,” *Conrad: Heart of Darkness, Nostromo and Under Western Eyes*, ed. C.B. Cox, p. 79.

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, “Kurtz, Hero of the Spirit,” *Conrad: Heart of Darkness, Nostromo and Under Western Eyes*, ed. C.B. Cox, p. 64.

¹⁹ Caryl Phillips, “Out of Africa,” *Guardian* (22 February 2003), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/22/classics.chinuaachebe> (accessed 12 April 2010).

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” *Joseph Conrad: Third World Perspectives*, ed. Robert Hammer (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1990), p. 124.

²¹ Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” p. 126.

²² Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” p. 124.

²³ Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” p. 124.

tion of the European agent by the 'savage' African native and his 'primitive' life. In other words, they believe that Kurtz's cohabitation with the indigenous community triggers his latent instincts of murder and crime. For Ghose, for example, "by going native, Kurtz finally gives way to [his] repressed desires,"²⁴ while for Singh "Kurtz's tribalization [...] can be seen as a rejection of the materialism of the West."²⁵ My point here is that the assumed tribalization of Kurtz, and the seemingly inconsequential references to his 'going native,' undoubtedly suggest that during his retreat into the wilderness, the European agent develops into a replica of the native African, which is not the case. Conrad's natives, the helmsman, the poleman, the fireman, and the dying figures of the chain-gang have nothing in common with Kurtz. They do not share the agent's megalomania, hubris and murderous instincts, which lead to the series of skulls posted around the interior station. Bearing this in mind, if we assume that Kurtz has simply turned native, the danger lies in the implication that all natives are savage murderers ready to pass on their germs of barbarism to all those who, like the Conradian agent, choose to brave the wilderness. This leads me to conclude, as announced earlier, that the psychological interpretation of Kurtz's descent into savagery simply redeems the image of the African by eclipsing the tribalization issue with its subsequent disparagement of the indigenous community.

In "The Pagan Coast," Phillips adopts a straightforward oppositional answer to the assumption of Kurtz's tribalization. To understand his counter-discursive response, we need to consider the concrete example of Nash's native conversion in Liberia. In his first address to his master, Nash faithfully reports his difficulties in adapting to the natives' ways of life. As a missionary, who vehemently clings to the rules of his Baptist education and Western upbringing, he refuses to integrate his local environment. But this does not last long. As we learn from his last letter, which completely reverses the logic of his earlier days in Liberia, Nash has gradually shifted to the African

²⁴ Indira Ghose, "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Anxiety of Empire," *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*, ed. Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000), p. 104.

²⁵ Singh, "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*," p. 49.

surrounding. In the absence of his master's financial support and psychological guidance, he has ultimately turned native.

Significantly, Nash's characterization at this stage allows Phillips to enter Conrad's discursive field and answer the issue of Kurtz's tribal assimilation. In other words, by creating a margin from which Nash can freely inform us about his social integration, Phillips implicitly spells out the mystery of the 'going native' process. He acquaints the reader with the concrete, unsurprising and essentially conventional steps of an African tribalization. That these bear no resemblance to Kurtz's barbarous acts in *Heart of Darkness* is Phillips's argument against the assumption of Kurtz's native metamorphosis. I would like to add, in this respect, that even though Nash William is portrayed at a certain point in the Phillipsian text as a "dictatorial" (*CR*, p. 33) character, a feature that might bind him to Kurtz, this is essentially presented as part of a man's complex humanity, rather than the result of native contamination.

In fact, already in his second message, Nash displays some evidence of his social integration into African life. He announces that he has "relocated into the heart of the country" (*CR*, p. 23). He has presently adopted a local mode of living and speaks a little of the native dialect, "a state of affairs" which he thinks "with practice [...] will regulate itself" (*CR*, p. 23). He has also renounced his missionary teaching and adopted the polygamous tradition of the place by marrying "three wives" (*CR*, p. 60). These apparently casual details about Nash's everyday life in Africa are extremely significant in terms of the character's integration, which is only acknowledged in his final correspondence, written in January 1842. Thus, addressing his former master for the last time, the now Liberian citizen, overtly declares that he suspends his Christian faith, and "freely choose[s] to live the life of the African" (*CR*, p. 62). Liberia, he explains, "has provided me with the opportunity to open up my eyes and cast off the garb of ignorance which has encompassed me all too securely the whole course of my life" (*CR*, pp. 61-62). Admittedly, in spite of this euphoric speech of liberation, it would be too facile to claim that Nash Williams is now totally released from the psychological dependence that conventionally binds a former slave to his master and to the place of his cap-

tivity. It seems nevertheless convincing that Nash finally accepts his social integration, and identifies with the African ways and customs. In the same correspondence, he speaks approvingly of his native women, whom, he writes, provide him "with as much care and attention that [he] might reasonably expect from an American-born woman" (CR, p. 61). He also concedes to the intrusive nature of his missionary work concluding that religion "can never take root in this country" (CR, p. 62). Even his wish to go back 'home' to America, so determined and persistent in the previous letters, is countered in this final communication by his resolve to stay in Liberia. He wants to raise his crops, and "feel the love of liberty that can never be found in [Edward's] America" (CR, p. 61).

My point is that the Phillipsian Nash does not really step into Kurtz's shoes. He is a man between two worlds, whose narrative demystifies the quasi-mythical obscurity with which Conrad approaches Kurtz's retreat in the wilderness in *Heart of Darkness*. There is no "haze," no "gloom [...] brooding," (HD, pp. 15-16) and no "unfathomable enigma" (HD, p. 71) behind Nash's relocation into the African interior. There is only a hard life, and a painful linguistic, religious and social adaptation. Through Nash's narrative, then, Phillips provides what John Thieme calls "a con-text,"²⁶ which writes back to the assumptions of Kurtz's native conversion not only in the Conradian "pre-text," but also in certain post-colonial analyses which clearly suggest, as I have already discussed, that "Nash, has, like Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, discarded the mantle of civilization and gone deliberately native."²⁷ By the same token, I would argue that Phillips's counter-discursive response saves the image of tribalization not only vis-à-vis the Conradian text but also, and in a much broader way, with reference to the West's sometimes persisting moral evaluation of Africa as a demonic social arena and a half-made, fragile and unfinished society where things can not be explained in terms of

²⁶ John Thieme, "Pre-Text and Con-Text: Re-Writing the Caribbean," (*Un*)*Writing Empire*, ed. Theo D'haen (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998), p. 89.

²⁷ Susan Wanlass & Vladimir Barac, Review of *Crossing the River, The Caribbean Writer* 9 (1995), http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.org/nofir_REVdetail.php?volsec=9067 (accessed 12 April 2010).

Western logic. Phillips adopts here what Benita Parry calls the “discourse of resistance.”²⁸ In other words, he refuses to give in to the Western representation of Africans and attempts what Ledent calls “a reversal of the anthropological gaze”²⁹ or simply promotes, in my view, a new anthropological and fictional image of Africa, one which would finally present the ‘black’ continent and its inhabitants as they really are and not as some Westerners would like them to be.

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²⁸ Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 37.

²⁹ Bénédicte Ledent, “Crossing a ‘Human River of Shattered Lives’: Caryl Phillips’s Diasporic Fiction/Vision,” *Literary Criterion* 35.1&2 (2000), p. 165.

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