

Beneath the indistinction, the poetics of Antonio Cicero

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Abstract: Antonio Cicero (1945-2024) was a poet who published three works of poetry during his lifetime: *Guardar* (1996), *A cidade e os livros* (2002), and *Porventura* (2012). In addition to his poetry in books, Cicero was also the author of numerous lyrics for songs in Brazilian popular music. This essay investigates, based on some parameters outlined by Antonio Cicero's own criticism of the poetry genre, how his poetic work operates some critical reflections on poetic making itself and on the city, two topics of singular interest in his poetry.

Keywords: Antonio Cicero (1945-2024); contemporary Brazilian poetry; Brazilian song.

Resumo: Antonio Cicero (1945-2024) foi um poeta que publicou em vida três obras de poesia: *Guardar* (1996); *A cidade e os livros* (2002) e *Porventura* (2012). Além da sua poesia em livro, Cicero também foi o autor de inúmeras letras de canções da música popular brasileira. Este ensaio investiga, a partir de alguns parâmetros traçados pela própria crítica de Antonio Cicero sobre o gênero poesia, como sua obra poética opera algumas reflexões importantes sobre o próprio fazer poético e sobre a cidade, dois tópicos de singular interesse na sua poesia.

Palavras-chave: Antonio Cicero (1945-2024); poesia brasileira contemporânea; canção brasileira.

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1. THE POET AND THE STRANGE PLACE OF POETRY

In his essay “Poetry Between Silence and the Prose of the World” (2017), Antonio Cicero defines the place of prose and poetry in the world, without, however, opposing them irreconcilably. As a starting point, the poet and essayist proposes replacing the expression “prose of the world” with “language of understanding”—an expression much closer to the term *Verstand*, derived from Hegel’s philosophy (Cicero, 2017a, p. 46, our translation). Language in this sense allows us to distinguish things, name them, separate them from one another, and classify them according to a form of convention that we find most pertinent. Accurately, Cicero (2017a, p. 49, our translation) tells us: “the distinctions established by understanding are conditions so that we can not only communicate, but also know, use, and think about the things that exist: so that we can know them in order to use them, and use them in order to know them.”

In the actions and Language of Understanding reside the guiding principle of disciplined knowledge, the conceptual formulation, and the method of categorization that we use in everyday and practical life. As Cicero (2017a, p. 48, our translation) points out, “language has many meanings and many roots, but the first is undoubtedly, as has already been said, practical and instrumental.” From this perspective, we use language to understand and instrumentalize things for our own purposes and desires; “thus, an instrumental apprehension of being is established, in which each thing is considered primarily as a means to other things” (Cicero, 2017a, p. 49, our translation).

At the heart of the instrumental apprehension of being lies understanding, and through this, we summon and orient ourselves in the process of constituting that being. However, this is not the only way of apprehending being, and it is at this point that the language of poetry comes into play. Unlike the language of understanding, the language of poetry has value in itself. Cicero (2017a)—in the same essay already referenced here—very well delineates the place of poetic language:

This serves no purpose; it does not serve any extrinsic purpose. It is valuable in itself. And neither does being, as aesthetically apprehended, serve any purpose. It too is valuable in itself. It is, therefore, a non-instrumental apprehension, which is neither carried out by the understanding, or rather, by the understanding alone, nor is it guided by it. Indeed, the understanding is only one of the various human faculties that can be summoned for the aesthetic apprehension of being. In addition to understanding and reason, imagination, sensitivity, sensuality, intuition, memory, humor, etc., are also capable of coming into play and, in effect, of freely interacting with each other, without hierarchy or predetermined rule (Cicero, 2017a, p. 50, our translation).

According to Cicero (2017a), the language of poetry ultimately renews the apprehension of being: it comes to be constituted by aesthetic form and not by instrumental reason, or even be totally subjected to critical reason; not that poems cannot address political and social issues. As Adorno himself (2003, p. 68)

would say—in his famous essay “Lecture on Lyric Poetry and Society”—: “works of art, however, have their greatness solely in letting speak what ideology hides.”

In another essay, entitled “Poetry and Laziness” (2017), Antonio Cicero observes that poetry, without rejecting language as a central point—quite the contrary—and without submitting to instrumental language, reaches a point where it cannot discern the way of saying from what is said:

What poetry can do, and effectively does, is use language in a way that, from the point of view of practical or cognitive language, appears perverse, because it refuses, for example, to accept the discernibility between signifier and signified, which constitutes a necessary condition for using words as signs, and takes them as concrete things. To separate, on the one hand, what a text says (that is, its meaning) and, on the other, its way of saying it (that is, its signifier) is to abstract the meaning from the signifier. When I tell someone, in my own words, a news item I read in the newspaper, or when I paraphrase a philosophy essay, or when I translate the leaflet of a medicine, I am abstracting from the texts, which are the original signifiers, their meanings. In a true poem, such abstraction cannot be done without betraying both the ignifier-signified totality of the poem and the abstracted meaning itself. This means that the true poem is always essentially concrete in the sense of consisting of an indecomposable synthesis of semantic, syntactic, morphological, phonological, rhythmic, etc. determinations (Cicero, 2017b, p. 33, our translation).

Poetry—as conceived by Antonio Cicero (2017b)—is the place where an object is constructed without separating form and content. Its function is not merely to be a means to do and know certain things in light of its acquired and socially fulfilled function. In the poem—because it is an end in itself—it can be repeatedly appreciated in reading or in evoked memory. It is for these reasons that poetry—unlike the place of distinction assumed by the universe of understanding—is always operating under a certain indistinction: in poetry, the universal and the particular; essence and appearance; subject and object are not defined. Each act of reading the poem generates a new appreciation; a type of aesthetic experience in the face of its authenticity (Cicero, 2017b, p. 52).

It is undoubtedly worth reading a poem by Antonio Cicero, which reflects on the points raised earlier and which was taken from his first book, *Guardar* (1996); the poem shares the same title as the work:

Keeping something doesn't mean hiding it or locking it away.

Nothing should be kept in a safe.

In a safe, the thing gets lost in plain sight.

To keep something is to look at it, to gaze at it, to observe it closely.

To admire it, that is, to illuminate it or to be illuminated by it.

To guard something is to watch over it, that is, to keep vigil over it.

her, that is, to watch over her, that is, to stay awake for her,

That is, to be there for her or to be influenced by her.

That's why it's best to preserve the flight of a bird.

More than a flightless bird.

That's why we write, that's why we say, that's why we publish.

Therefore, a poem is declared and recited:

To store it:
So that he, in turn, may keep what he keeps:
Keep whatever a poem holds:
That's why the poem is about that:
By keeping what one wants to keep (Cicero, 2025, p. 15, our translation).

Guardar (To Keep) is a poem of unparalleled intelligence. It is a poetic composition in which the term “*guardar*” (to keep) takes on a meaning that is opposed to its more instrumental meaning in everyday language. To keep is not to lock something away—to hide something from sight—; to keep in the poem assumes a powerful image of freedom. Every poem holds something of the one who has looked at the world: the observer is also being observed. If we accept that the poet’s act of looking from the mountain horizon manages to gaze at and admire the landscape and people—or something of the sort—and to extract from them the poetic portrait of that moment, this same act is projected, in turn, in the opposite direction, and we also accept that the poet can be seen in a kind of reciprocity of established gazes. Poetry—as a singular act of the one who composes and the one who experiences it in reading—figures a reciprocal and crossed act. Through poetry, we look and notice, but we are observed. More than that: by looking, we already anticipate the expectation of being looked at. It is no coincidence that one of the meanings proposed within the poem is that of preserving something, illuminating it, or being illuminated by that same thing.

Undoubtedly, a poem holds within itself a form of memory of the world that no longer constructs rigid divisions between subject and object; universal and particular. The poem preserves that which cannot be imprisoned and contained. In its linguistic materiality—made of rhythms, sounds, and tonalities—the poem aims to preserve the freedom of the creative act, where it is permitted to write, and therefore, to record what has become fleeting in the world. Fleeting, but not unimportant; on the contrary, it is in the experienced instant that importance is found. With the poem, a breach opens to revisit what seemed to be lost time and place; the thing seen is not lost.

The act of creating a poem is also an act of preserving something, though one doesn’t know exactly what. It preserves a moment of observation of the world; a time spent with imagination; a kind of chance established in this form of observation. The poem only acquires value in itself “by preserving what one wants to preserve” (Cicero, 2025, p. 15, our translation). It is in the moment of the poet’s initial and unique observation that the search for what to preserve begins. In his essay “Poetry and Laziness,” already mentioned here, Antonio Cicero makes a precise observation about this incessant search undertaken with the capture of words:

The poem develops from some initial decision or chance occurrence. For example, the poet first hears a phrase on the subway; from it, an idea is sketched out: and he begins to write a poem. Or an idea occurs to him and he tries to unfold it and realize it concretely. At each step, choices must be made. At some point—whether

at the beginning or in the middle of the work—it becomes necessary to decide the overall structure of the poem: whether it will be long or short; whether it will be divided into stanzas; whether its verses will be free or metrical; whether they will be rhymed or unrhymed; whether the poem as a whole will have a traditional format, like a sonnet, or an invented, *sui generis* form, etc. Sometimes, a first decision seems to impose all the others, which come as if naturally and thoughtlessly; sometimes, certain moments occur as crises awaiting solutions. Sometimes, it is necessary to redo everything (Cicero, 2017b, p. 40, our translation).

Published in his book *Porventura* (2012), the poem “*Blackout*” is a record that involves the constructed scene of the relationship between the writer and the chance events of that moment, forging a moment of inevitable reciprocity and apprehension of the poet before the world that observes him:

I spend the night writing.
On the other side of the street
Could someone see me?
from that dark building,
In front of mine, and higher up.
What voyeur would spy on me?
The only interesting thing I do is...
to write. He would see.
certainly the back part
from the computer; perhaps,
from that other window,
spotted, obliquely,
the left side of my
profile view; never
however he would see
certain crystal verses
liquid that, secret evil
with the salt of my sweat,
And they're already announcing secrets.
only mine and some reader's
which will you share with me
paradise and exile,
the tears that come from laughter,
The success that comes from the mistake.
Of all this, my neighbor
He doesn't suspect a thing.
But what if he, having read
my lips, which pronounce
what is written on the screen,
to realize oneself exiled
not only from my paradise:
From my exile, poor thing?
What if he pays attention to everything?
and out of envy and resentment
Shoot me from there?

Better to close the blackout (Cicero, 2025, p. 147, our translation).

Built in seven-syllable verses, the poem's foundation also formulates an act of keeping a secret—a result of the poet's own writing activity and an act of expanding beyond the intimate and reflecting from there; the poetic self seeks to maintain what is most precious to him as the encrypted code of poetry itself. The constructed scene—as I will call it—is of a poet who, in front of his computer, observes the external landscape and glimpses some possibilities. The poet—in the midst of writing and in front of the computer in the middle of the night—suggests that an external gaze—that of a *voyeur*—is spying on him from the outside in. The verb “could”—someone see me—reaffirms that this is only a possible condition; an expression of mere probability. His question, “What *voyeur* would spy on me?” adds a layer of mystery to the scene, making the reader question even more the real purposes of the one who supposedly spies on the poet in action. The poetic self is precise in imagining the possibilities of the external gaze: “he would certainly see the back of the computer; perhaps, from that other window, he would glimpse, obliquely, the left side of my face in profile” (Cicero, 2025, p. 147, our translation). But most importantly, the supposed *voyeur* would not have access to what was most precious to be kept; the verses that unfold on the screen: “[...] never, however, would he see certain verses of liquid crystal that, barely secret, with the salt of my sweat, already announce secrets only mine and some reader's who will share with me paradise and exile, the tears that come from laughter, the right that comes from error” (Cicero, 2025, p. 147, our translation). In the poem's final denouement, the poetic self-conjectures a new hypothesis: what if the observer from outside this intimate space of the poet could read the lips “[...] that pronounce // what is written on the screen” (Cicero, 2025, p. 147, our translation) and, with that, the poor wretch would realize—from the very writing kept there—that he is in a world of poignant solitude? And further—and in a more terrifying way—the poet warns: what if, faced with this revelation, there is envy and resentment, and the *voyeur* decides to end the poet's life with a gunshot? The poet was left with no choice but to close the *blackout*.

As a key to understanding this poem, it seems fundamental to consider the terms “paradise” and “exile” present in its verses. Both the image of paradise and exile occupy an ambiguous place, pointing to the relationship between the poem itself and the act of reading it. Paradise is much more calibrated with the aesthetic pleasure that words can bring; exile—in a different way—indicates solitude, loneliness, and, to a certain degree, the very suffering that reveals something unsettling and strange in the act of reading—reading a poem can be an inevitable discomfort. These images suggest an almost opposing parallelism, which is very well complemented by the composed verses: “the weeping that comes from laughter, // the rightness that comes from error” (Cicero, 2025, p. 147, our translation). The poet interprets that there is always a risk of intersecting gazes in the poem; after all, the poem can disturb and demand a reaction from the reader, and the reader may—even if hypothetically—react.

2. THE POET AND THE CITY

Antonio Cicero was a keen observer of cities in all their dimensions: territorial, spatial, cultural, natural, erotic, social, and individual. He allowed the city to enter his poetry in the same proportion that he nourished himself from that same urban space. The urban landscape transformed the poet, just as the poet transformed that urban landscape through his critical and aesthetic lens. The work *A cidade e os livros* (2002)—his second published book—is his most poetic and, so to speak, his most geographical work, the one that most thoroughly explores urban spaces to construct its poetic diction. His gaze is attentive to every small space in the city—especially Rio de Janeiro, his city. Noemi Jaffe, who developed a doctoral thesis on Antonio Cicero, wrote the following regarding the specificity of *A cidade e os livros* (2002):

[...] is a book that is not only temporal (vertical) but also geographical (horizontal). Since there is a single lyrical self-presenting places, things, people, in short, the city of Rio de Janeiro, it is also a spatial book, a city-book, a place-book, in which, although there is an opening poem (“Prologue”) and a closing one (“Exit”), the reader can freely move from poem to poem, participating in the journey proposed by this lyrical self, who is thus a kind of narrator: a journey through the contingency of a city, through the only language he considers still capable of providing a direct (non-critical, non-distanced) relationship with things: poetry (Jaffe, 2017, p. 17-18, our translation).

It is worth mentioning one of the most emblematic poems in this book to note how urban space operates in Antonio Cicero’s poetic form. The poem in question is titled, like the title of the work, *A cidade e os livros*, and is one of the most significant in the book:

Ms. Vanna Piraccini

Rio seemed inexhaustible.
to that teenager that I was.
Alone, entering the Castelo bus.
Jump at the end of the line, walk without fear.
in the center of the forbidden city,
in the middle of the crowd that didn’t even notice
that I didn’t belong to him – and suddenly,
Anonymous among anonymous people, note.
euphoric, yes, that it belonged
to her, and she to me –, to enter alleys,
alleyways, avenues, galleries,
cinemas, bookstores: Leonardo
da Vinci Larga Rex Central Colombo
Marrecas Íris Middy Cosmos
Alfândega Cruzeiro Carioca
Morocco Passos Civilization
Cavé Sahara São José Rosário
Public Promenade Ouvidor Standard
Vitória Lavradio Cinelândia:

places I didn't even know existed before
 They opened up into endless corners.
 of streets that can now be extended
 throughout all the cities that existed.
 I had only felt something similar.
 upon realizing that adult books
 I was also interested in: that in principle
 They had been written for me.
 All the books. Today is different.
 because all the cities shrank,
 They are predictable, they cause claustrophobia.
 and they would even be boring, if they weren't
 the countless books that contain (Cicero, 2025, p. 82-83, our translation).

Researcher Noemi Jaffe (2007) notes in this poem a reflection on belonging and its forms of pursuit. According to her, it is not just any kind of belonging—the kind that individuals allow themselves to have through evident identification with a specific cause—but something far more uprooted (Jaffe, 2007, p. 170) than that. The city—seen under the sign of complete freedom of transit and mobility—allows a form of anonymity that escapes individual control of actions in urban space. In these imagined—perhaps lived—cities, the chance encounters are permitted, or as Antonio Cicero said in an essay on poetry and urban space: “once they emerge, cities multiply the indications of the occurrence of new intersections” (Cicero, 2005, p. 15, our translation).

Reading the poem “*The City and the Books*” suggests an interpretative path through two embraced temporalities. Rio de Janeiro—as a privileged space that allowed the young adolescent’s incursions—is permeated with memories constructed in the mystery of a certain “forbidden city.” It was a territory that guaranteed a kind of discovery for the young man: amidst the people who wandered between squares, avenues, crossings, and alleys, the poetic self reveals to itself the recognition of something previously unnoticed. Among the anonymous, the poetic self finds its place of identification in the world. Thus, the poet skillfully crafted it: “amidst the crowd that didn’t even notice // that I didn’t belong to it—and suddenly, // anonymous among anonymous people, to notice // euphorically that yes, that I belonged // to it, and it to me” (Cicero, 2025, p. 82-83, our translation). The city of the young man’s time was pure discovery; his intense now.

This youthful temporality intersects with the temporality of the poetic self’s adult life. For this self, the city is no longer a discovery with its unique sense of belonging. As a territory to be explored, it no longer displays all the vigor that, in the past, figured and stimulated discovery and formation; on the other hand, books—like that city of yesteryear—assume the role of guaranteeing a new sense of belonging for this self. Through books—as the final part of the poem announces—it is possible to find new alleys, side streets, and previously unknown corners. With the nostalgic city that no longer allows itself to be visited and with the “infinite books,” it is possible, in solitude, to make oneself belong.

As can be seen, the poem “*The City and the Books*” connects the poet to urban spaces and the imaginary spaces of books. In the book of the same name as the poem, there are other good poems in which the city—from many points of view—is explored: this is the case with the poem “Showcase.” It is worth transcribing it:

What do you see in that dark-haired man’s gaze?
Are you eyeing the sneakers behind the shop window?
Or the glass that exposes and inhibits them.
Its reflections serve as a mirror for it.
and he falls back into the image of himself,
Equally visible and intangible?
That’s how tantalizingly she affects me.
obliquely and at the same time directly
and it mesmerizes, and I feel kind of like
If I undressed him and he barely noticed.
When I look back for a moment, I realize
to dream and, unless I’m mistaken, to have in one’s eyes
fragments of a green football field
made the tablecloths of casinos (Cicero, 2025, p. 102, our translation).

Antonio Cicero observes the city in different ways to extract from it a poem of rare sensitivity. Sometimes, the object of poetic reflection is contained in the gaze at a shop window and in the desire that spreads from the poetic self. The shop window—so common in modern cities—can be both the gaze at what is on display and the place of reflection, whether of people or landscapes. Here, the shop window in a corner of the city enters as an ambiguous place: it establishes itself between seeing and reflecting; the gaze is external to the body facing the window; a body is observed by the poetic self, without being aware of it. That gaze of the desired person is, at once, the record of a vision of the altered reflection on the surface: will it be “visible and intangible?”. It is undoubtedly a chance encounter —characteristic of what cities themselves offer to their observers who sometimes seem to observe the other, sometimes allow themselves to be observed by the stranger. In this case, one can say that it is the fortuitous encounter between the poetic self and the reflected image. It is this image that fascinates the poetic self: it becomes its desire. Suddenly, the observed may, for an instant, have turned away, and the observer may have become the object of another’s gaze. Was it possible for unknown subjects to cross paths in the big city at the observer’s moment of pause? More important than having an answer to this: the poem conjectures about this place of indistinction and indefiniteness in that instant. Perhaps the game has reversed, and the observed subject in front of the shop window has assumed this undefined place between desire, the gaze, and the instantaneous moment. In the city, gazes may have crossed in this game proposed in the space of comings and goings: this is the instant that interests the poet.

3. "EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU IS FULL GAS"

Antonio Cicero was the helmsman of his own life until the end. The reader may have noticed that, until now, almost nothing has been said about the events of the poet's life; allow me a brief digression. It is also possible that the reader, at the end of 2024, also heard of Antonio Cicero's death in Switzerland—widely reported in the media; in fact, Cicero opted for assisted suicide. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2023, he was already facing the worst that an intellectual could face with the progression of the disease: memory loss and the inability to fully produce what he loved most: the act of reading and producing vigorous writing. As a writer, he took the importance of life experiences seriously.

His writing was not limited to poems in books or to poetry criticism and philosophy. His songs—set to music by various popular Brazilian musicians—hold a special place in the cultural production of recent decades, as they demonstrate a unique vivacity; they preserve the record of moments and encounters: about the importance of life lived.

As one might expect—even as a tribute that falls short of what the poet deserves—this essay concludes with two forms of "Fullgás," transcribed as a Poem-Song and presented as a manifesto included as a separate sheet in Marina Lima's *Fullgás LPs* in 1984. "Fullgás," in song form, is perhaps Antonio Cicero's most popular work; it's quite possible the reader has encountered it at some point in their life. Freely interpreted, Antonio Cicero's Poem-Song might be seen as a synthesis of what the poet was in the world. This song is built on a kind of vital impulse—everything unfolds in the most individual and social form of love, culminating in an attentive capture of what we experienced in the 1980s, fresh from the dictatorship: "you open your arms to me // and we make a country" (Lima, 1984). The manifesto, in turn, is also a synthesis of what the poet himself was experiencing; there was no room for the squares and their order. Both texts complement each other and include the contribution of his sister, Marina Lima. Let's enjoy: "Simple as fire. Full throttle!"

You are the one who makes my world.
 music, lyrics and dance
 Everything about you is full throttle,
 You're the one who sets the pace.
 launches more and more
 I'm only going to tell you one secret,
 Nothing bad can reach us.
 because having you as my toy
 Nothing hurts or tires.
 So come and tell me
 what will it be
 of my life
 without you
 Cold nights, and days are gone,
 and a strange world
 to hold me

So, wherever you go,
That's where I'll be.
clever love,
It's so good to love you!
And everything beautiful that I do,
Come with you, come happy.
You open your arms to me.
and we make a country (Lima, 1984, our translation).

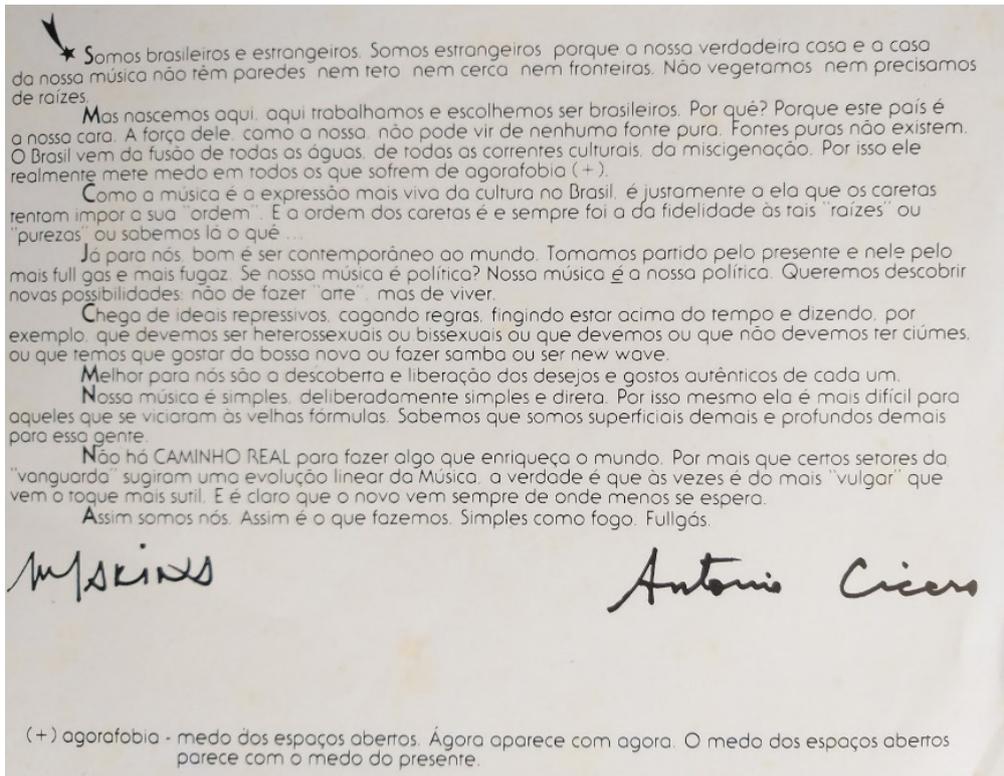


Figure 1: Image of the "Fullgás Manifesto," included in the *Fullgás LP*

Source: Lima (1984).

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