

## **AS I HEAR MY VOICE CALLING: ISSUES AND MATTERS IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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### **Abstract**

When asked to write her autobiography, dancer Isadora Duncan replied: “How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it?”. Autobiography, the writing of the self, constitutes a difficult genre, and poses several challenges in terms of style and narrative strategies: a) Which moments in the life of an individual should be selected? b) How can one turn public private and intimate experiences?; c) Which techniques belonging to the realm of fictional narrative can be successfully adapted to the art of autobiography? In this paper, I’m interested in debating the main problems that writers, musicians and actors, such as Maya Angelou, Bob Dylan or Michael J. Fox, associate with autobiographical writing. I also analyze a few techniques authors employed to solve or minimize those issues. To do so, I resort to the opinion of autobiographers; to the essays of specialists in creative writing; and to my experience as a teacher and researcher in that field.

### **Resumo**

Quando lhe pediram para escrever a sua autobiografia, a bailarina Isadora Duncan respondeu: “How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it?”. Autobiografia, a escrita do eu, constitui um género difícil e coloca vários desafios em termos de estilo e de estratégias narrativas: a) Que momentos da vida de um indivíduo

devem ser selecionados? b) Como se é possível tornar públicas as experiências mais privadas e íntimas?; c) Que técnicas pertencentes ao reino da ficção narrativa podem ser adaptadas com êxito à arte da autobiografia? Neste artigo, proponho-me debater os principais problemas que escritores, músicos e atores como Maya Angelou, Bob Dylan or Michael J. Fox associam à escrita autobiográfica. Analiso também algumas técnicas que esses autores empregaram para resolver ou minimizar as dificuldades. Para tanto, recorro à opinião de autobiógrafos; a ensaios de especialistas na área da escrita criativa; e à minha experiência como professor de Escrita Criativa e Guionismo.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, narrative strategies, Maya Angelou, Bob Dylan, Michael J. Fox

**Palavras-chave:** Autobiografia, estratégias narrativas, Maya Angelou, Bob Dylan, Michael J. Fox

### 1. True lies

In the novel *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), Quentin Crisp defines autobiography as “an obituary in serial form with the last installment missing” (Crisp 212). Any more serious attempt to precise the concept of autobiography is probably doomed to fail, due to the complexity inherent to this genre. As James Olney argues, “everyone knows what biography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement” (Olney 3). The definitions a researcher finds in a dictionary do not survive a rigorous scrutiny and rise more questions than they offer reassuring answers. For instance, the *Collins English Dictionary* presents *autobiography* as “An amount of a person’s life written or otherwise recorded by that person” (Collins 102). In my perspective, this definition is far from deserving to be inscribed on a marble slab, for three reasons:

a) Numerous autobiographies are not written by the self, but by ghost writers who organize the recollections of an unarticulated football player or of a politician more inclined to an ideological speech. In those cases, there is an authorial coincidence between the biographer that remembers but does not write, and the biographer who writes but does not remember

b) It is arguable that biographical narratives are precise, since what an author presents is the fragmented memory of a restricted number of events. Some of those episodes occurred years ago and suffered the rewriting of forgetfulness, experience and imagination. Gradually, the waters of truth and the waters of fiction mingle, and the recollections presented are less *memories* and mainly *rememories*, reconstructed according to one's perception of the past.

c) Finally, those recollections are subject to the manipulation of self-censorship, to a chronological hierarchy of events, to the subjective interpretation, *a posteriori*, when the narrator possesses a larger life experience. Under these circumstances, where is the true self? As Isadora Duncan questioned, in her biography *My Life* (1927), "How can we write the truth about on ourselves? Do we even know it?" (Duncan 1). Ailsa Cox seems to answer this question: "There is no 'real me' waiting to be discovered; no such thing as a 'true story'. The self becomes a series of performances, rather than a fixed identity; autobiography turns into another type of fiction" (Cox 78-9).

In conclusion, in an autobiography, an individual plays a triple role: he is simultaneously the writer, the narrator and the protagonist. The element of truth is made pliable by the hammer and horn of imagination and the narration of memories becomes the story of stories, incidents and anecdotes. I agree, therefore, with Patricia Meyer Spacks who defends that "To read an autobiography is to encounter a self as an imaginative being" (Spacks 19).

In this context, I'm interested in detecting some of the strategies biographers borrow from fiction. In order to do so, I resort to examples extracted from three autobiographies: the classic *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), by African American writer Maya Angelou; the first volume of *Chronicles* (2004), by folk musician Bob Dylan, chosen as Book of the Year by *The Guardian* and *The Time*; and, finally, the best-seller *Lucky Man: A Memoir* (2003), by actor Michael J. Fox, known by his participation in TV series such as *Family Ties* or the *Back to the Future* trilogy.

This is a deliberately heterogeneous selection of books, written by a novelist, a musician and an actor belonging to different generations. In common, they resort to several narrative strategies, combining elements of fiction, drama and rhetoric. I will focus on six of these techniques:

- a) The use of an inviting first paragraph or *incipit*, to captivate the attention and interest of the reader;
- b) Narration of an episode determinant to the discovery of an artistic vocation, an epiphany, usually described in a poetic language;
- c) Description of a place, capturing its atmosphere or *genius loci*;
- d) Narration of an episode that allows the reader to better understand the spirit of a certain age;
- e) Description of a character, using literary strategies;
- f) Reference to curiosities and anecdotic episodes, stories inserted in the frame of the general narrative;
- g) Emphasis on the transformation of the self, similar to the one underwent by a fictional character.

## 2. The perfect beginning

In creative writing jargon, the first paragraph of a literary text is known as the *hook* and, as the word indicates, its function is to motivate and capture the interest of the reader (Mancelos 8). Most contemporary autobiographies avoid following a chronological order, or even beginning in childhood or in any remote moment. Numerous authors prefer to borrow from fiction a simple technique: to begin with a curious, humoristic or significant episode.

In some cases, that anecdote — in the classic sense of the term, i.e., a brief story or event — also plays another function: it establishes the melancholic, sarcastic or humorous tone of the autobiography. Such is the importance of the first passage that English novelist Jenny Newman tells other aspiring writers: “Any first paragraph that engages the attention of your reader is a success. Any other is a failure” (Newman 54).

In the first four lines of *Lucky Man: A Memoir* (2003), Michael J. Fox describes how, during the filming of *Doc Hollywood* (1991), a romantic comedy, he discovered the first symptom of what would later be diagnosed as Parkinson disease: “I woke up to find a message in my left hand. It had me trembling. It wasn’t a fax, telegram, memo, or the usual sort of missive bringing disturbing news. In fact, my hand had nothing at all. The

trembling was the message” (Fox 1).

This brief passage subverts the expectations of a reader who might have thought that the message destined to Fox had been sent by a director, screenwriter or producer. The author uses the fictional technique of omission — he doesn’t mention the illness —, thus placing the reader in the same position of the young man who, at that moment, ignores the origin and gravity of the problem, and is puzzled by a thumb that moves itself as if it had a life of its own. The short sentences contribute to generate this anxiety, while the last period of the paragraph reveals the intensity of the discovery: “The trembling was the message” (Fox 5).

A few pages afterwards, Fox describes the incident as the “pinkie rebellion” (Fox 3), setting the humoristic tone that will prevail in this autobiography. It is, in short, a particularly successful hook, which escapes commonplace beginnings, and replaces self-pity with courage. Fox explains the choice of this tone for his autobiography:

I sought no pity, or tears. Nor was I eager to cast myself in the role of the reluctant hero, breaking out of his silent suffering to take his fight public, and serve as a poster boy for the Parkinson’s ‘cause’ (...) I was simply tired of hiding the truth from people and felt ready, finally, to present it to them on my own terms, with the hope that they’d respond to my story in the spirit in which it was offered. (Fox 270)

### **3. An artistic epiphany**

Numerous autobiographies by writers, musicians, painters or actors dedicate a few lines to the magic moment when an individual discovers, with astonishment, his artistic vocation. In *El Ángel Literário* (2004), Guatemalian author Eduardo Halfon describes that instant as a visit from a winged being, but I prefer the term James Joyce imported from the Biblical discourse: *epiphany* (Joyce 211).

African-American writer Maya Angelou fell in love with literature, in general, and with the oeuvre of William Shakespeare, in particular, in the most improbable place: the small black town of Stamps, in Arkansas, where she spent part of her childhood with her

maternal grandmother Annie Henderson.

Having been raped by Freeman, one of her mother's companions, Angelou testified against the aggressor in court and he was found guilty. However, after twenty-four hours in jail, Freeman is inexplicably released and, four days afterwards, Angelou's uncles apply their own punishment: the rapist was found in a dark street, kicked to death. Angelou becomes mute, believing it was her voice that had murdered Freeman, and during five years she didn't utter a single word. A friend of the family, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, helped Angelou recover her voice and find her literary talent, by lending her books by white and African-American authors:

During those years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois 'Litany at Atlanta'. But it was Shakespeare who said, 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes.' It was a state of mind with which I found myself most familiar. I pacified myself about his whiteness by saying that after all he had been dead so long it couldn't matter to anyone any more. (Angelou 16)

In this passage, Angelou recalls how she found out the pleasure of reading and reports her first encounters with books by a series of authors that would influence her literary career. Knowing that a list of writers would cause her readers to yawn, she concentrates her attention on the English bard, and treats him as her "first love" (Angelou 16). Angelou evokes Shakespeare with the nostalgia and tenderness one recalls an old flame. However, she avoids an emotional tone, by adding a humoristic note, excusing herself from having fallen in love with a white man.

To listen to the canonical voices and black authors that, at the time, had not yet been recognized by the Academia, was determinant to Angelou's career, and to the history of autobiography itself. Joanne M. Braxton qualifies *Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) as one of the most aesthetically pleasant memoirs ever written (Braxton, 4). I believe that

quality arises from the colloquial dialogues; the poetic descriptions; the strategic manipulation of the chronology of the events, to create inside each chapter a thematic similar to the one found in a short story.

#### 4. The spirit of the place

The first volume of the autobiographic trilogy *Chronicles* (2004), by folk musician Bob Dylan, covers the period from the arrival of the young man from Duluth, Minnesota, to New York, in 1966, until the recording of his first albums, emphasizing his amazing experiences in the Big Apple, described as “the city that would come to shape my destiny. Modern Gomorrah. The initiation point of square” (Dylan 9). For several decades, Dylan became the epitome of the protest singer, composer of songs like “Blowing in the wind” (1963), and a paladin for civil rights. Against the expectations, *Chronicles* (2004) presents an introspective young man, less interested in the socio-political transformations of the sixties and completely absorbed by the art of music. The title of Janet Maslin’s review, which appeared on *The New York Times*, summarizes the incredulity felt by the fans: “So You Thought You Knew Dylan? Hah!”, adding: “The Old Him is the hellhound who taunts Bob Dylan” (Maslin 1). Is the protagonist of *Chronicles* (2004) a mere fictional construction? “The answer is blowing in the wind”. It is possible that this biography intends to contradict the musician’s public image, in order to show a different facet of the artist.

Dylan possesses two qualities highly valued in any writer: first, he resorts not only to vision, but to the five senses, in particular to hearing, in order to describe more accurately and vividly a certain place, person or object (Stein 160-66). Secondly, he manages to capture the atmosphere of a place, the *genius loci*, a combination of the information conveyed by the senses and subjective impressions (Mills 123-124). A good example of the use of these techniques can be found in the description of the Kettle of Fish Tavern, a legendary pub with live music, in Greenwich Village:

That place was usually packed, too, on any given night of the week. A frantic atmosphere — all kinds of characters talking fast, moving fast — some

debonair, some rakish. Literary types with black beards, grim-faced intellectuals — eclectic girls, non-homemaker types. The type of people who came from nowhere and go right back into it — a pistol-packing rabbi, a snaggle-toothed girl with a big crucifix between her breasts — all kinds of characters looking for the inner-heat. (...) You could sit on a bar stool and look out of the windows to the snowy streets and see heavy people going by, David Amram bundled up, Gregory Corso, Ted Joans, Fred Hallerman. (Dylan 47)

Dylan draws a vivid portrait of the Kettle of Fish Tavern, thanks to the use of details such as “a pistol packing-rabi” or “a snaggle-toothed girl with a big crucifix between her breasts”, which contribute to enhance the eclectic and artistic atmosphere of the place. “God is in the details” (Colomina 197), the aphorism by *designer* Ludwig Mies van der Rohe can be perfectly applied to this passage, since sensory and concrete details grant it interest, credibility and meaning. For a moment, ghosts of old-time musicians, hippy muses, and ambitious young writers come back to life on this luminous page.

## 5. Moving the wheel of time

Since an autobiography is composed of a selection of past moments, any author must know how to convey the atmosphere of a certain age, borrowing techniques from fictional narratives. The time when an artist lived molded his personality, thought and perhaps even his literary style. In some specific cases — biographies by presidents, activists of civil rights, military leaders and other individuals who changed the course of History — it is paramount to understand the subjective impression they convey of a certain age.

To capture the atmosphere of a certain generation is far more complex than capturing the spirit of a place, especially when the author approaches long and convoluted periods, such as the sixties. An option lies in portraying an age in general terms, remembering, collecting documentation, and interviewing older people. Another possibility — frankly more interesting — consists of selecting a representative episode that will reveal the ideas, prejudice and challenges of that era.



Similarly to what happens in the description of places, the author should combine several techniques, as David Lodge advises in *The Art of Fiction* (1992), “Effects on fiction are plural and interconnected, each drawing on and contributing to all the others” (Lodge 56). In this spirit, the event must be vividly narrated, so that the action will be perceived as a scene taking place at present and not an antique that has been dust cleaned.

In *Chronicles* (2004), Bob Dylan tells the readers how his personality and ideals were molded by the fifties, a decade that came to be known as the Atomic Age or Age of Anxiety. Instead of describing in broad terms the sinister Cold War that took place between the USA and the USSR, and the fear it spread among the population of both nations, Dylan focus his attention on one single episode:

In 1951, I was going to grade school. One of the things we were trained to do was to hide and take cover under our desks when the air-raid sirens blew because the Russians could attack us with bombs. We were also told that the Russians could be parachuting from planes over our town at any time. These were the same Russians that my uncles had fought alongside only a few years later. Now they had become monsters who were coming to slit our throats and incinerate us. It seemed peculiar, living under a cloud of fear like this robs a child of his spirit. (...) There were a lot of folks around who took this threat seriously, though, and it rubbed off on you. It was quite easy to become a victim of their strange fantasy. (...) When the drill sirens went off, you had to lay under your desk facedown, not a muscle quivering and not make any noise. As if this could save you from the bombs dropping. (Dylan 29-30)

In a few lines, Dylan describes the emergency drills, during the Cold War, and the long lasting impact of these rituals in the mind of a sensitive child. In order to do so, he adopts the perspective of a little boy of the fifties: Russians are described as monsters that peopled nightmares and propitiated the most sinister fantasies (Dylan 29). Dylan carefully selects the vocabulary to construct an atmosphere of terror: “cloud of fear”, “afraid”, “threat”, “victim”, etc. (Dylan 29). Finally, he resorts to irony to comment upon the ridiculous of the situation: “These were the same Russians that my uncles had fought alongside only a few years later”; “As if this [hiding under the desks] could save you from

the bombs dropping” (Dylan 29-30).

Another technique to evoke the spirit of an age consists of summarizing some of its most relevant characteristics. The author conveys his impression of that time, and mentions the importance of certain incidents and events to his personal life, establishing a bridge between the public and the private spheres. In the last paragraph of *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan evokes, nostalgically, the sixties:

The folk music scene had been like a paradise that I had to leave, like Adam had to leave the garden. It was just too perfect. In a few years' time a storm would be unleashed. Things would begin to burn. Bras, draft cards, American flags, bridges, too — everybody would be dreaming of getting it on. The national psyche would change and in a lot of ways it would resemble the Night of the Living Dead. The road out would be treacherous, and I didn't know where it would lead, but I followed it anyway. It was a strange world ahead that would unfold a thunderhead of a world with jagged lightning edges. Many got it wrong and never did get it right. I went straight into it. It was wide open. One thing for sure, not only was it not run by God, but it wasn't run by the devil either. (Dylan293)

Dylan condenses in a few words the changes that occurred during that troubled decade: “things would begin to burn. Bras, drafting cards, American flags, bridges” (Dylan 292). This selection of flaming events reflects the sudden and radical transformations which marked the nation, in the fields of feminism, pacifism and politics. Taking advantage from the temporal distance, Dylan observes these changes, neither operated by God nor by the Devil, but by a generation that aspired to a better world. Believing in those ideals, Dylan describes his commitment, associated with his public image: “I went straight in” (Dylan 293).

## **6. People made of paper and ink**

The personality and biography of an individual is molded by his social circle, artists, and political and religious leaders. These influences are not always euphoric, but can be

determinant, inspiring decisions and beliefs. To transform those real persons in characters, so that paradoxically, they seem more real to the readers is a task that demands from the autobiographer the knowledge of literary techniques.

To effectively describe a character, a writer can place him in interaction and dialogue with the other participants in the story. A proficient reader will gather clues and analyze them, in order to create his mental image, empathic or not, of the character. The portrait that results from this indirect characterization can be completed by the narrator, who provides information regarding the physical traits of the character and grants the reader access to his thoughts, secrets and memories. In this context, it is important to humanize the characters, revealing strengths and flaws, and making him a credible person, in spite of being made of paper, ink and imagination. A good biographer must be specific, remembering the most significant details of a person; but it is paramount that he is able to select them, so that he won't be lost in an ocean of irrelevance (Morley 168-69).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angelou makes this vivid portrait of her father, whom she meets after a few years of absence:

A year later our father came to Stamps without warning. It was awful for Bailey and me to encounter the reality one abrupt morning. We, or at any rate I, had built such elaborate fantasies about him and the illusory mother that seeing him in the flesh shredded my inventions like a hard yank on a paper chain. He arrived in front of the Store in a clean gray car (he must have stopped just outside of town to wipe it in preparation for the "grand entrance"). Bailey, who knew such things, said it was a De Soto. His bigness shocked me. His shoulders were so wide I thought he'd have trouble getting in the door. He was taller than anyone I had seen, and if he wasn't fat, which I knew he wasn't, then he was fat-like. His clothes were too small too. They were tighter and woolier than was customary in Stamps. And he was blindingly handsome. Momma cried, "Bailey, my baby. Great God, Bailey." And Uncle Willie stuttered, "Bu-Buh-Bailey." My brother said, "Hot dog and damn. It's him. It's our daddy." And my seven-year-old world humptydumptyed, never to be put back together again. (Angelou 59)

This description is convincing because Angelou travels back to childhood, and

presents her father from the point of view of a girl. In this perspective, she concentrates mainly on two features: Bailey's stature and dazzling beauty. The presence of a car also indicates the affluence of this man, since few African Americans could afford such a vehicle in the thirties. The reader understands little Maya's utter surprise, thanks to a suggestive verb: "my seven-year-old world *humptydumpled*, never to be put back together again" (Angelou 59).

## 7. Anecdotic sketches

The generality of biographies include anecdotic sketches sewn together to form a patchwork of experiences. Many of those stories consist of personal curiosities, and oddities that stimulate the readers. In his autobiography *Lucky Man: A Memoir* (2003), Fox will approach the sensitive issue of Parkinson disease, obviously, but he doesn't concentrate much on that matter during the first five chapters, preferring to remember episodes from his infancy, youth and his professional life as an actor. For instances, recalling the première of *Back to the Future*, in London, an event attended by Princess Diana Spencer, Fox tells this hilarious story:

You couldn't speak to her unless she spoke first; if seated, you weren't allowed to rise until she did; and never, ever, did you turn your back toward her. I didn't anticipate any problem adhering to these guidelines until the lights went out and *Back to the Future's* opening scene scrolled across the movie screen.

Then it hit me: a sharp and unmistakable discomfort — I had to take a leak. Urgently. Made sense — the anxiety, the *goddamn beer* — but what the hell was I going to do? I was hostage to etiquette. She'd been too polite to speak during *my* movie, and if she did say anything, *whatever* it was, 'Excuse me Your Highness, I have to go wring it,' was not going to be the appropriate response. I couldn't just get up and leave unless she did. And even if I could, I'd have to back away, tripping over the other people in our row and probably falling on my ass. There was, of course, one final option — but that was unthinkable. (Fox 121-22)

Stories like one this amuse the reader and, simultaneously, relieve the dramatic tension and weight of an illness that could easily submerge the most euphoric aspects of the actor's professional and familiar life. In autobiographies, it is the confessional tone and the sharing of some embarrassing moments that humanize the protagonist, and consequently bring him closer to the readers.

## 8. Personal transformation and life mission

In the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), by Oscar Wilde, Dumbly states: "Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes" (Wilde 48). Numerous autobiographies are written at an age when the author can analyze, with maturity, his existence, as if he were on the top of a hill. Of that meditation may result pieces of advice and well-intentioned cautions, based on invaluable life experiences. Similarly to what happens in a fictional narrative, the personality of the biographer has evolved through the contact with other individuals, events and incidents. Angelou presents a concise reflection upon one of those personal changes, occurred when she was sixteen and unwillingly got pregnant for the first time:

Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I didn't know what I was aware of. I knew very little, but I was certain that the things I had yet to learn wouldn't be taught to me at George Washington High School. (Angelou 290)

The narrator feels that she has changed and became more conscious of herself, as a woman, an African American, and an artist, due to traumatic experiences, such as her rape, flight from home or vagrancy. At the same time, she courageously prepares herself for new changes, with that spirit of adventure that, at eighty-two, still defines her.

Fox also delineated a mission for his public life, after having been diagnosed with young onset Parkinson disease. He decides to take advantage from his status as a famous TV and cinema actor, to divulge the objectives and challenges felt by those who suffer from that problem, and to defend their cause:

My name attracts attention, provides access, and therefore helps us achieve our goals somewhat faster than we otherwise might. Is this fair? Is it right? Well, that's a complicated question, but the fact remains: *I have this disease*. This is not a *role* I'm playing. Like any other patient, my participation is uniquely informed by my experience. I know the issues, I'm compelled to understand the science, and I share my community's sense of urgency. Quite apart from all that, I happen to possess this most rare and useful currency — celebrity — and I've discovered a wonderful way to spend it. (Fox 302)

*Lucky Man: A Memoir* (2003) showed, in a well-humored but realistic way, the daily life of a Parkinson patient. In the sequence of this *best-seller*, Fox has been striving for the interests of Parkinson patients, giving talks, collecting funds for medical research, and defending the use of embryonic stem cells, in the hope of a cure. The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, instituted in 2000, constitutes one of his most recent efforts in this unremitting battle.

## 9. Conclusion: life rewritten

In *The Dyer's Hand* (1962), poet Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) states: "Every autobiography is concerned with two characters, a Don Quixote, the Ego, and a Sancho Panza, the Self" (Auden 96). To be sure, memoirs are *me-replacements* (Bell 90), stories where the self is less *revisited* and mainly *reviewed*, constructions of memory and forgetfulness, censorship and selection, reality and fantasy.

This image of the self is frequently constructed through literary strategies imported from fiction: use of hooks; narration of meaningful anecdotes; subjective recreation of the atmosphere of a locale or age; vivid characterization of a character; etc. Therefore, any autobiographer must have not only talent but also knowledge of these techniques, since he is simultaneously author, narrator and protagonist.

All biographies consist in the art of salvaging the past, and making public what once belonged to the private sphere. In some cases, this life experience serves humanitarian causes: Angelou denounces racism in American society; Fox battles for a

cure for Parkinson disease; Dylan proves that the ideals of the sixties are still very much alive. Autobiographies are, thus, a singular and intimate meeting between reader and author, somewhere in the landscapes of the self — a hard land where truth sprouts in the soil of fiction, and fiction becomes more real than reality.

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