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Explorations, Preoccupations, and Derivations

Seamus Heaney writes in his thoughts on poetry that “a voice is like a fingerprint” (*Preoccupations* 43). Which honestly makes this exercise in emulating his work a little odd, that I have spent a year and a half trying to recreate something so integral to each writer that Heaney links it to the very example of individuality. Still, I am glad I had the chance to do it, and I do not think there was a more appropriate object of study for me to work on. I love all poetry, and I could have easily thought of a few dozen other poets worth styling my work after, but no one was quite as right for me as Heaney was. Figuring out how to recreate his fingerprint has been an exercise in frustration, but also a great learning experience. I have greatly increased my understanding of how poetic technique and methods by studying a poet of his caliber, and it has allowed me the opportunity to better understand myself as a poet and writer.

As I began this intense study of Heaney’s work, I read Irish history, critical reviews of his work, newspaper articles, as well as his actual poetry and prose collections. I did this in hopes that it would allow me to not just recognize his poetic “fingerprint” but to understand how craft and technique created that fingerprint. I wanted to emulate elements of his prosody and style; with emphasis on his use of narrative, imagery, and sound—specifically consonance, in my own creative work. This was a challenge.

Of course, Heaney’s most famous poem is “Digging” from his *Death of a Naturalist* collection. In that poem, he recalls the work of his father and grandfather as “peat diggers” who do manual labor in the bogs of Ireland, and struggles with how he can honor their legacy even as he rejects their careers.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging. (*Poems 1965-1975* 3)

This poem is where most people get their introduction to Heaney, and it was no different for me. I am not certain exactly the first time I heard it, but it must have been my senior year of high school. When I read it now, it’s almost infuriating. Everything that he writes feels so easy, natural and readable. I have worked on recreating his style because I want that same easy readability in my own work, but it has been a lesson in patience.

There is one poem in particular that I think I managed to get a sense for Heaney’s techniques from “Digging”. In “Two Photos of Family Jumpers off Elk Falls, TN” I tried to follow his sense of story-telling, where he observed his family’s history through the actions of his elders. In my own family, jumping off of a (very dangerous) waterfall in Tennessee has been a tradition for a long time. I have two photos, one from 1932, and the other from 1992, where my great grandfather and grandfather were snapped mid-jump:

In both photos, their

feet point down and their arms

rise to their sides like cranes,

like the right gust could find their spans

and they would gently glide down.

They must have hit hard, sucked

deep into the water violently,

as pointedly as though

some giant threw them, aiming

to spear a large fish dead center

with their bodies.

In this poem, I did a slightly different spin on Heaney’s active observance of looking out his window, shifting it to looking at two photos hanging on a wall. Heaney’s poem works especially well because of his distinct language, you can hear the “rasping sound” echoing out of the poem, which was one of the things my own poem failed to recreate as strongly. I also enjoyed toying with a parallel of water to Heaney’s soil metaphor throughout the poems I worked on this semester. He grew up in a farming family, and I grew up on the southern part of the Patuxent River. This poem felt like my own personal response to his metaphor, particularly with how I tried to recreate the “turn” at the end of “Digging”.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap

Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I’ll dig with it.

There, he allows the reader to join him in his understanding of what digging can be, and how he can continue his family’s traditions without necessarily rejecting the honor of the work they did. My poem also echoes this sense of carrying on family traditions in a new fashion:

I have been told you cannot jump

you must run. There is no option

to weigh uncertainty, to ponder, to whisper

encouragement, to gaze over the edge

or stick out your foot to test the icy thin sheet of wind.

The air must blow past your ears.

You must commit fifty yards back,

set yourself sprinting, hellbent and

gracelessly skidding over glorious mudded slime;

briefly interrupting a scream that suddenly

doesn’t look like yours as you leap away from it,

reaching for empty arms of air

that do not care to catch you.

You cannot jump you must run.

Ah. That’s it. Where poems come from.

I worked on the ending to this poem for months. I rewrote it over and over again, and every time it just did not work. Originally, as of June 2013, the final stanza ended like this:

The air must blow past your ears you must commit

fifty yards back, set yourself sprinting

slipping over wily stones screaming terrifying and leap

reaching for grinning empty arms of air.

And that was it. I thought that the final image of a suspended jumper, cutting out the actual fall into the water, was entertaining, but I could feel that the poem was not done. I kept on tweaking the ending, endlessly, and I distinctly remember one day over the summer, when I realized what the thesis of the poem was and I felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner: “You cannot jump, you must run”. That declaration was why I started writing the poem, even though I did not know I was writing the poem for that reason. And the instantaneous rhyme of “Ah. That’s it, where poems come from” was one of the most fun moments I have ever had writing a poem. I had thought I was just styling myself after “Digging”, looking for excuses to write and work on poems even when I was not really feeling inspired to do so. But “You cannot jump, you must run” suddenly felt like a foghorn that I had been deaf to and I could not believe I had missed it. My poem was about poems, about the willingness to see where poetry could take me. Which is exactly what I was trying to do with Heaney in the first place. Writing that poem made me feel a lot more confident about my work, and it gave me a good mental starting point, just like Digging did for Heaney. I had established my relationship to poetry, something that was not going to go out of its way to save me, but I needed to run head-on and jump into it if I wanted to get anywhere.

I continued after the Elk Falls poem, trying to figure out what elements of Heaney’s work I wanted to recreate. I immediately noticed that part of what makes Heaney’s poems “his” is their movement of imagery. His poems do not stand still and they do not freely associate in stream of consciousness. They see, notice, and watch the progression of life and moments. Maybe Heaney figured out that a poem dies if it stands still for too long. In “Casualty”, he describes a man ordering drinks:

He would drink by himself

And raise a weathered thumb

Towards the high shelf,

Calling another rum

And blackcurrant, without

Having to raise his voice,

Or order a quick stout

By a lifting of the eyes…

At closing time would go

In waders and peaked cap

Into the showery dark… (*Field Work* 13)

I enjoyed the way Heaney makes you follow his own perception, starting in on something small, the man by himself, most especially his raised thumb. Then we hear the drinker’s voice call out for another and notice his eyes lifting, and finally his walk out the door, a cap snug on his head. Heaney’s pastoral imagery has always appealed to me, and at the start of this project I thought that was the main thing I wanted to reproduce. But the more I read of his work, the more I realized that it was not really what Heaney saw that I liked, but the way he saw it: in parts, little by little. He has a gift for zooming in and out of a scene so smoothly that you do not even know it is happening. I tried to focus on this sense of moving imagery in one of my poems, Ham Radio:

A thumb and index twirl the knob carefully

in case something dangerous lurks in turns of the dial;

then adjust the volume, send it swooping.

And the squeaks and squeals and squawks that burst out of the black

box are not born of farms but from high and far away;

from spheres of air that cloak the world.

I was hoping that by “zooming” in on the single image of a turning knob, I could focus the reader into the button and create a quick mystery about what its purpose was that I could reveal in the following lines. Then, I could announce the presence of sound from that initial image of the dial on the radio.

The following stanzas continue the “zoom-out” so to speak, by revealing the group of people gathered in front of the radio who “gather at dark, beneath a steeple of knit steel in slickers and boots” and listen to the radio:

Sometimes the silence ruptures, laughter tumbles out and stuns us

like pieces of very bright light. But at other times--in the stretches,

the pauses, the hushed thread of silence the antenna follows drifting across the sky,

We find ourselves ignoring human grumbles and listen

to the stars whispering. Their long-held secrets shimmering,

murmuring some cold and ancient tongue.

Like Heaney draws the reader to follow the path of the man at the bar, who eventually walks to his death, I wanted the reader to follow the image of sound within the radio to a greater source, to make them “swoop” up like the volume did in the first stanza, so that they would start on the knob, then hear the radio, then see the people, then look up to the antenna, then slowly follow the radio feed up to the stars in a greater sense of connection. My hope was that each movement would create a mental line of sight that would look up a little higher with each stanza.

I was really happy with how this movement of imagery turned out, because it also tied in with my goals of recreating Heaney’s sense of narrative. I learned during this project that there does not always have to be a “story” being told. By which I mean that a poem does not have to have a plot or crisis to make it have narrative. It just means that all of Heaney’s poems are an “account” of some kinds of connected events. Whether we see their connections easily is not always necessary, but there are connections to be found. For the man ordering “a quick stout”, he “lifts his eyes” and “at closing time would go in waders…into the showery dark”. He does not stand still because movement means something. We can learn a lot by the way someone moves through the world.

To extend this note, I have also realized one of the biggest reasons for why I like Heaney’s work. He has lots of classic rhetorical devices, but he makes a point to not write too many direct metaphors, where “*a* is *b*”, or similes, where “*a* is like *b*”. It is more about the suggestion of a metaphor. Such as in these lines from “Clearances”:

The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.

I heard the hatchet's differentiated

Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh (“The Poetry Foundation”)

Instead of saying that the hatchet “sighed like\_\_\_” he throws in a word that slightly anthropomorphizes the object and we suddenly have a sense of the hatchet’s inherent personification, rather than a direct instruction on its personality and characteristics. Based on this, I have tried to pull back on my similes and metaphors because I have realized they can be too commanding of a reader; ordering them to see “this as this”. Heaney is a bit gentler in how he asks you to participate in the imagery of his poems.

Another of my goals in emulating Heaney has been to recreate his sense of sound and consonance. I was struck by how he said in *Preoccupations* that “Certainly the secret of being a poet…lies in summoning the energies of words” (36) It reminded me that although Heaney is influenced by the Irish and Latin languages, he is primarily a poet anchored by the history of the English language. And “summoning the energies of words” is a strange concept but it is exactly right. Heaney channels English over the centuries and imbues his writing with its strongest and most powerful sounds. And what is more native to any language than its onomatopoeias? Flipping through a few of Heaney’s books finds these: *croak, squelch, slap, thwack, tinkling, cawing, barking, rasping, knelling, cooed*. Thick, largely mono-syllabic guttural words that are coated with consonance at every turn.

So with sound in mind, a specific example of my effort to recreate Heaney’s attention to this is found in my poem, “Rain”, one of my few attempts at following a rhyme scheme (a sonnet-esque pattern). I styled this poem after the opening to Heaney’s *Human Chain* collection. Which begins:

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

A wind that rose and whirled until the roof

Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore

And got me up, the whole of me a-patter,

Alive and tickling like an electric fence:

Had I not been awake I would have missed it.

My opening stanza to this probably follows his diction a little too closely, with the images of roofs and leaves, but when I realized I had a poem with similar subject matter I thought the language should echo his:

The rain has been falling steadily enough,

A constant rhythm in gutters and eaves.

A perpetual induction to the cracks in the roof

and haphazard pulp of rot and leaves.

All night’s been this. Unruly clangs’ve careened,

A gallop of sounds skipping wild and rebellious,

tossing about in the tops of the trees.

I look out and up, half incredulous:

I tried to pick out words that both “sounded” and suggested sound. The poem is mostly about listening, after all, and I thought that a poem about listening should make you listen to it. There is a violent kind of music in the thunderstorm, and the combination of a rhyme against heavy consonance helps to mimic that effect. Rhythm is one of my weakest points as a writer, and I am trying to get better at it. The final line of the second stanza reads particularly awkwardly on the “half-incredulous” so that is likely to change. I do not think this poem is finished, but I intend to keep working out the rough patches until it can scan smoothly. In the fourth stanza of the poem, I also mention that the “walls chatter”, and the sound that word makes always pleased me with its suggestion of sound, and its parallel to Heaney’s use of “patter”.

But as I kept writing poems, I started thinking more and more about the subjects I was choosing. They tended to be nature, animals, people other than myself. And this was on purpose. I had decided early on that I did not want to write about myself too much, because it felt a little too raw, and I just shut the door on it. Eventually, however, I started asking myself, “What exactly would I write if I was willing to expose parts of myself that I did not like?” And I ended up writing a poem called “Agreement”. This is an excerpt:

and I must admit I feel like a muppet

with my head always bouncing.

You need to understand

I’m very worried about myself.

I am constantly trying to push

myself back into line….

I am so concerned I just want

to be married and taken care of,

that I don’t stand for anything

I want to want to stand for,

that I might actually agree

my way into an empty house,

that this neurotic bit might really be

all there is to women, anyway;

that I’m the problem.

This made me profoundly uncomfortable. Honestly, every time I have read this poem in a workshop it makes me cringe. Part of that is because I am embarrassed at a poem that is just not right. It was written in maybe five minutes around December 2013 in response to a quote from Yeats’ *Explorations* that Seamus Heaney put at the opening of his own prose book:

If I had written to convince others I would have asked myself, not “Is that exactly what I think and feel?” but “How would that strike so-and-so? How will they think and feel when they have read it?” And all would be oratorical and insincere. If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about those others, but because all life has the same root. (qtd. in *Preoccupations* 16)

I copied that quote down into my journal because it resonated with me. Everything I wrote prior to that was with the reader in mind, because I thought that was what a good poet did. They kept the reader in mind, because to not do so was self-indulgent and ran the danger of too much subjectivity to make any sense. But this thought from Yeats suggested I was a little too constrained by the yoke of the ever-present reader. I sat at my computer and asked myself what I would write if I was not afraid to write, and then started tapping out the words to Agreement.

Agreement is a poem-in-progress. I have tried very hard to complete it before the end of this semester but it needs to incubate a little longer. A lot of the rhythm bothers me, and the line “detonating above his head” feels very contrived. But still, it is one of the few poems I have written where I really feel like it is me speaking, and not a version of a poet that I *want* to be speaking. Writing that poem made me feel vulnerable and I am not over that yet. But I enjoyed finding a new way in which poetry could surprise me, and I also felt like I had come to terms with an aspect of poetry that I had found very frustrating, its tendency to devolve into narcissism.

The narcissistic aspect of poetry was one of its biggest turn-offs to me for a long time. I could not get past the “I have so many feelings” trope and I did not want to be lumped into the camp of people who overestimated the importance (or worse, people’s interest) in their relationship trials or homework tribulations. I was worried that writing poems like “Agreement” would put be placing too much stock in my own stories. I had specifically avoided even using first person in a lot of my poems because I wanted to keep myself out of the equation. By my estimation, if people criticized my poem, then I could justify it as them criticizing whatever the subject of my poem was. Writing directly about myself opened me up to a level of criticism that I was not prepared to handle.

This sense of narcissism is getting to be an old complaint, and not just in poetry. Nothing really feels private at the moment. The internet is an opportunity in many ways, but it also feels like a curse. In the weirdest paradox, people publish their blogs online and beg people to read their diary entries. I am constantly bombarded with people announcing things in their lives, or posting statuses, or doing revealing interviews of past trauma, and it starts to turn into a giant blur of admissions and revelations. I do not want my poetry to be quantified by the accumulation of “likes” on my newsfeed, and I do not want it to get attention because I dredge the deepest traumas and gory details of my inner-life for some voyeuristic display. Despite that, however, I have realized that I was using that avoidance of narcissism as a cop-out so that I could avoid feeling vulnerable in my writing. If I am to take Yeats’ quote to heart, then I have to recognize that writing about oneself is not simple narcissism, it is an elemental way of connecting with other people. Because to write truthfully is a way of offering part of your experience to your reader in a (admittedly terrifying) new way, and people respect that because “all life has the same root”.

That is exactly why I chose Heaney for this project. I do not think there is anything wrong with poets who use their medium as a tool or method of working through personal hurts, or as a way to remove shame from things that have happened to them. But I love that Heaney is humble. He never says “look at me”. He looks out to the world around him, and always seems a little surprised when he discovers that he has learned something about himself in the process.

I would also like to address some ideas I have on the subjects of economics and English, my two majors. Although they seem to be opposing disciplines—I cannot help but feel the two are inextricably and fundamentally linked, which I found accurately and entertainingly explained when I watched the Robin Williams film, The Dead Poet’s Society.

Early in the movie, Williams as the unorthodox Mr. Keating asks a student to read the first page of his English textbook aloud to the class, and begins furiously sketching a graph on the chalkboard based on the student’s recitation:

To fully understand poetry, we must first be fluent with its meter, rhyme and figures of speech, then ask two questions: 1) How artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered and 2) How important is that objective?...And once these questions have been answered, determining the poem's greatness becomes a relatively simple matter.

If the poem's score for perfection is plotted on the horizontal of a graph and its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness. A sonnet by Byron might score high on the vertical but only average on the horizontal. A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, would score high both horizontally and vertically, yielding a massive total area, thereby revealing the poem to be truly great.

It may seem I am misunderstanding the joke of graphing the success of a poem. It is not lost on me that Mr. Keating’s response to this is the succinct “Excrement! That's what I think...! We're not laying pipe! We're talking about poetry. How can you describe poetry like American Bandstand? ‘I like Byron, I give him a 42 but I can't dance to it!’”

But if I am being honest, the idea that the merit of poetry can be judged on an XY graph is really not that far off from what I believe, and that stems from studying two diametrically opposed areas of academics.

To explain what I mean, it is important to quickly summarize economics. Economics is, at its core, the study of the problem of scarcity. In turn, scarcity is the problem of how we allocate limited resources in a world that has unlimited wants. Every market transaction and reaction between people who want things, and the things they want, is defined by the laws of supply and demand. Keynesian economics orders that as supply goes up, demand goes down, and as demand goes up, supply goes down.

With those simple definitions out of the way, it is not hard to apply the laws of supply and demand of economics to English, and understand how I view it in relation poetry. Poetry is the laws of economics in action, in the market of the English language. A poet makes constant decisions on how to manage the supply of words against the demands of a poem in order to minimize waste and allow its essence to be fully realized without distraction. And as long as we are minimizing wastefulness, we should note that efficiency is a type of beauty, where the function of something is supported by its form. Where is that more true but in poetry, the only form of English where the metrical, prosaic, and visual form of the words on the page all intricately work together, the tiny gears of a perfectly balanced machine?

Admittedly, the supply of words in the English language—and especially in the loosely-managed realm of poetry—is massive. But just because the supply seems limitless, that does not mean that we should always write epic poems as if we get paid a dollar per word. A poet should look for optimization and efficiency. I do not believe that Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “First Fig” would have been improved on if she had written it like *The Aeneid*:

My candle burns at both ends;

   It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—

   It gives a lovely light! (*Norton Anthology of Poetry* 1382)

The idea requires succinct language, as though it were written in a joyful dash, the sudden bursts from a hurried mind that barely has time to acknowledge the thought. (As an aside: I almost chose to emulate Millay for this project. I always got a kick out of her, from the first time I came across this poem six years ago). To borrow Heaney’s mantra, I feel like Millay put my feelings into word—of how pleased I am by a happy moment or clever line in poetry—even if the study of it might overwhelm me.

My understanding of poetry and economics does not mean that I want my committee members to quantify and graph my poems on their greatness and merit, it just means that in an abstract and broad sense, I relate to poetry as an economic use of the English language. When I—or anyone—writes a poem, we are subconsciously asking these types of questions: what elements of language does the idea demand in order to be expressed in the most efficient and beautiful way possible? What does the poem *want* to be, and how will language, rhythm, meter, imagery, and sound fulfill that? As far as I am concerned, the poet and the poem are tightly linked economic markets, supplying their own demand, and creating their own supply.

The fact is, poetry is an efficient medium for ideas and stories. It is the only medium that causes the audience to internalize and replace their voice with the disembodied one of the poet on the page, and still suggests the reader remember and say it again and again through its impulses of repetition and rhyme. Poetry makes ideas that are incorporeal, corporeal by literally taking the concept into a reader’s mind and causing the words to occupy a new space in the universe where they did not exist before. The words make an astounding the leap from the page and colonize a new territory. I love novels and short stories and flash fiction and plays, but nothing moves me with its power quite the way that poetry does.

This all might be a bit heavy-handed, but those are my feelings on the matter. And in summary, I do not think it would be inappropriate to hijack Ogden Nash’s views on marriage for this, with the union of economics and English being a strange but obvious marriage: “the only known example of the happy meeting of the immovable object and the irresistible force”. My jury is still out on which one is which.

But aside from all that economics business, I do have a problem with poetry. In fact, I have many problems with poetry, because poetry is important to me. I did not realize how important it was to me until I was sitting in Business Calculus 155, during the spring semester of 2012, when I got especially bored during derivatives and started scribbling out the first lines of the first poem I ever really wrote for myself, that is now called “Four Days Ago”.

I wrote “Four Days Ago” because of an incident where my mom was in a panic. She realized that the glue trap she bought had worked exactly as it was marketed, and she suddenly did not know how to handle the profoundly stuck mouse extricated from behind our fridge. A mouse that formerly, for the record, she had been determined to catch. While she wrung her hands over what to do with him, it struck me that an old biology teacher in high school had encountered this same problem at home and told us about it during a class break. Most importantly, I remembered her solution, so I did what she did: I drowned him in the toilet.

It was completely horrible, and I felt horrible about myself, and angry at my mom for putting down a glue trap if she had not thought ahead to what she would do if she actually caught the mouse, and I was angry at myself for carrying out the drowning. In response to that, I then thought exactly what a reader of this might have thought, which is that it was a mouse, it was vermin, and I was overthinking it. But, then I thought about what it meant to be the kind of person who rationalized causing pain to something else as “overthinking”—and that really bugged me.

Anyway, to put it bluntly, the mouse stuck with me. And for the first time, I felt prompted to write a poem. I scribbled out a poem in class because I felt that by committing my mini-mouse dilemma to paper, I was giving an affidavit to my conscience. That started it all. I enjoyed struggling with the ambiguous morality of that poem, and then I just wanted to write poems all the time, and that made me happy.

Being happy was a big change. I had to leave UMBC in 2009, and at the time I was miserable about it. I was lucky to get a good job in my hometown, but I felt like my life was being set up without any input from me, and that I would have the same cubicle in thirty years and count down the days to retirement like all the people I worked with. I had taken a poetry class at UMBC my freshman year, but was not enamored with it (yet). I liked reading other people’s work, but writing it myself was just an exercise in frustration and felt pointless. It took another three years, with my soul sucking away in Calculus, that I realized all at once that poetry was something that could sustain me (even if it made my already abysmal math skills suffer). I could jot down lines on my PowerPoint printouts in meetings and no one was the wiser (the “handouts” style of printing was especially helpful for stanza construction). I could scroll through it on my phone, paste it to the corner of my screen and pick it apart in between reams of data entry.

I believe that Seamus Heaney needs poetry too. In the final poem to his Death of a Naturalist collection, “Personal Helicon”, he uses the metaphor of wells as an explanation of how poetry sustains him. He obsesses over poems because they allow him to look within himself and he finds peace in its consistency. He calls down, and poetry always responds:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,

To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring

Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme

To see myself, to set the darkness echoing. (*Poems 1965-1975* 40)

Poetry sustains Heaney and I both, but we differ in the why. Heaney needs it for comprehension. Verse allows him to “set the darkness echoing” and let a “clean new music” come back to him; he needs it to understand the question of himself. I need poetry reductively, as a defibrillator when my spiritual pulse weakens.

Now that I am back in school, the spot that poetry occupied suddenly has lots of other interesting subjects (and some less interesting) competing for it. I am taking all sorts of classes that I like, and reading books that are interesting, with difficult questions that I like thinking about. I still love poetry, but I need it slightly less. It makes me realize suddenly that my motives for poetry are selfish. Poetry was there for me when I needed it, but now I spend too much of my time with other subjects in English, while poetry sits in the corner and thumps its tail when I walk by.

To be clear though, I am never going to abandon poetry. It makes me profoundly happy, and I am completely thrilled that I had to waste away in Calculus for a semester so that I could discover my true north in poems. I honestly have no clue what I would be doing otherwise. I will probably never be a professional poet who writes full time, as much as I would like that. But I can be perfectly content staying up into the night and keep figuring out to summon up the strange and awesome energies of words.

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