

Transposing the *Zeitgeist*? Nikolaus Pevsner between *Kunstgeschichte* and Art History

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In April 1933, Nikolaus Pevsner was dismissed from his position as *Privatdozent* (a lecturer affiliated to an institution but paid directly by the students) in Art History, which he had held since 1929 at the University of Göttingen, on the grounds of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*). This interrupted a career in which he had already accomplished what might be described as several rites of passage.¹ It is interesting to tackle the case study that constitutes Pevsner's subsequent migration to the United Kingdom in terms of the transfer of his professional accomplishments, because the theoretical frameworks traditionally used in the history of exile and of migration are only partially relevant to understand the transfer of his sense of self into a new environment. Until the 1990s, the main narrative within research on the migration of intellectuals and scholars was largely positive assessing the gains, both for universities and for society in general, of the transmission of knowledge from German-speaking refugee scholars.² This view was challenged in 1996 in *Forced Migration and Scientific Change: émigré German-speaking Scientists and Scholars after 1933*, which set out to focus on 'the geographical circulation of intellectual elites'³ rather than on an assessment of the degree of cultural assimilation. This new paradigm allowed for a more nuanced approach to the topic particularly relevant for art history, for which no real tradition existed in Britain, certainly not on the scale of the status enjoyed by the subject in Germany and Austria. The successful rescue of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* through its emergency

¹ The concept of rites of passage is developed in: Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967. See in particular the chapter IV, 'Betwixt and between'.

² For the study of the migration of intellectuals and scholars, see Marion Berghahn, *Continental Britons: German-Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Berg, 1988; Charmian Brinson, ed., 'England? Aber wo liegt es?': *deutsche und österreichische Emigranten in Grossbritannien 1933-1945*, Munich: iudicium, 1996; William Abbey, ed., *Between Two Languages: German-Speaking Exiles in Great Britain 1933-45*, Stuttgart: Heinz, 1995; Karen Michels, *Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft: deutschsprachige Kunstgeschichte im amerikanischen Exil*, Berlin: Akademie, 1999.

³ Mitchell Ash and Alfons Söllner, eds., *Forced Migration and Scientific Change: émigré German-speaking Scientists and Scholars after 1933*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 6. Recent scholarship developed this new paradigm of circulations, for instance: Jeremy Seabrook, *The Refuge and the Fortress: Britain and the Persecuted, 1933-2008*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008 and Shula Marks, ed., *In Defence of Learning: the Plight, Persecution, and Placement of Academic Refugees, 1933-1980s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

relocation from Hamburg to London in 1933 went down in the history of art history as a model of displacement,⁴ which tends to gloss over the diversity of isolated cases by representing German-speaking art historians as a homogeneous collective. After his arrival in England, as shown in Susie Harries' biography of 2011, Pevsner's newly forming identity did not revolve around the usual ideas of being a 'migrant' or a 'refugee', two concepts that he was actually reported to have regularly dismissed.⁵ However, we will try to demonstrate that his sense of identity was very elaborate and self-reflected when it came to his profession. An academic discipline and the institution in which it is practiced can be understood as the basis for the formation of a group identity, a sense of belonging that goes along with an *ethos* or way of life. In the case of Pevsner, this discipline was that of the *Kunsthistoriker* in the first half of the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, the rites of passage that he had been through before he had to leave Germany⁶ were the following: his Ph.D. thesis was supervised in 1924 in Leipzig by Wilhelm Pinder, who became his mentor.⁷ The following year, he published a volume on Italian mannerism in the famous *Handbuch für Kunstgeschichte*.⁸ This can be seen as recognition of his potential as a leading art historian who could go on to make groundbreaking contributions to his field. He then worked as Voluntary Assistant to the *Gemäldegalerie* in Dresden, where he gave several lectures and became closely acquainted with the modern art world. In 1929, he started his role as a *Privatdozent* in Göttingen.

This paper is based on a close reading of Pevsner's own impressions of his emigration to Great Britain in the 1930s and on the continuation of his career as a *Kunsthistoriker*. Rather than translate this term, it seems appropriate to use the German word since the main question and the main motivation behind Pevsner's work in Britain is: to what extent can the German-speaking form of art history be translated into English? Was Pevsner able to translate his own reflection and practice of his academic discipline and to re-establish the place he felt he had lost? The documents presented here all share an 'us and them' rhetoric familiar in situations involving natives and foreigners. More so than Germany itself, Pevsner's homeland seems to have been *Kunstgeschichte*. He defined himself as being part of a

⁴ See Dorothea McEwan, 'A Tale of One Institute and Two Cities. The Warburg Institute', in *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, vol. 1, Ian Wallace, ed., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999, 25-42.

⁵ Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011.

⁶ Pevsner's university training and early career are studied in Ute Engel, 'The Formation of Pevsner's Art History: Nikolaus Pevsner in Germany 1902-1935', in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, Peter Draper, ed., Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, 29-55. See also Stephen Games, *Pevsner - The Early Life: Germany and Art*, London: Continuum, 2010.

⁷ On Pevsner's relationship to German art and architectural history and to Wilhelm Pinder in particular, see Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Nikolaus Pevsner: art history, nation, and exile', *RIHA Journal* no. 75, October 2013, accessed on-line: <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2013/2013-oct-dec/whyte-pevsner>.

⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Die italienische Malerei vom Ende der Renaissance bis zum ausgehenden Rokoko*, Potsdam: Athenaiion, 1928.

tradition, a community with whom there was a spiritual continuity, even if the physical link had been broken.

This argument will be presented in three stages, following a roughly chronological order: firstly, what was the definition of *Kunsthistoriker* in the 1930s, and could this *Kunsthistoriker* find a place among contemporary 'art historians'? Moreover, it seems that the emergence of art history as a discipline, as noted by both Pevsner and by his British colleagues in the 1950s, mainly followed the German model. However, this evolution apparently remained incomplete and unsatisfactory.

Finding a place: the *Kunsthistoriker* as a displaced scholar

In 1933, Pevsner wrote to the Academic Assistance Council in London, recently established to help migrant scholars to cross the threshold to a new country in which they would be allowed to work. Renamed the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) after the war, it granted scholarships and helped academics in their search for employment. It was based on a principle of freedom of movement for ideas and individuals within a scientific community which, it was assumed, transcended political boundaries. The official term 'displaced scholar' was applied to those who benefited from their help. However, we might ask whether it is possible for a scholar, whose status is mainly defined by the attribution of a specific role within the academic system, to be displaced with, according to the SPSL, an exact transfer of abilities. Any attempt to answer this question should take into account the particularities of the academic subject of the displaced scholar. In the case of Pevsner, several cover letters sent to the SPSL on his behalf indicate how his professors and colleagues saw him, and can also be read as definitions of what makes a *Kunsthistoriker*.

The reference provided by the art historian Wilhelm Pinder in May 1933 stresses Pevsner's great commitment: 'I have known Dr. Nikolaus Pevsner for ten years since the very beginning of his studies. Already during his studies at the University of Leipzig, he showed a pure and strong eagerness for the questions of our discipline.'⁹ In the German original, Pinder uses the word *Eifer* which really suggests a sense of vocation, of dedicating oneself to the cause of art history. He calls Pevsner a 'pure nature', a 'keen spirit, driven by true passion'.¹⁰ Here is expressed a real sense of pride in the fact of belonging to the community of scholars in the field of Art History, a community in which the transmission of knowledge goes hand-in-hand with the transmission of a particular *ethos*. The young scholar is presented by his mentor as a vital element among a new generation. This is why Pinder highlights the precocity and the pioneering dimension of Pevsner's career, even if he was as yet still a *Privatdozent*: '[Pevsner] is involved to the deepest level

⁹ Wilhelm Pinder, Cover letter, 31.05.1933, Ms SPSL Archive 191/1 - /2, Bodleian Library: 'Herr Privatdozent Dr. Nikolaus Pevsner ist mir seit mehr als zehn Jahren bekannt, von seiner frühesten Studienzeit an. Schon während seines Studiums an der Universität Leipzig bewies er einen ungewöhnlich reinen und starken Eifer für die Fragen unserer Wissenschaft.'

¹⁰ Pinder, 31.05.1933: 'dieser reine Charakter, (...) dieser scharfe von echter Leidenschaft getriebene Geist.'

with the life of German Research, yet he possesses at the same time a general openness to all the major historical and social contemporary issues.¹¹

Another referee, Percy Ernst Schramm, assistant professor of medieval history in Göttingen, shared Pinder's high opinion of the recent progress of the discipline of art history in German-speaking countries, and of Pevsner's ability to make the most of this progress in his professional training:

It is fair to say that German art history in the last thirty years has been one of the most active fields of all and that it has particularly advanced the humanities; this is why I would think that a man like Pevsner, who has taken in this whole school and has developed it further by himself, would not only be a *réfugié* whom a favour was done, but that he would actually be a person who would bring over something peculiar to him, and something beneficial.¹²

Here too, a school of thought to which one has to be initiated is identified as being at the core of the discipline of art history. The expression 'has taken in' (*'hat in sich aufgenommen'*) is strongly suggestive of a rite of passage that Pevsner had to go through to be granted a place among the *Kunsthistoriker*. Being a *Privatdozent* was the last intermediary stage before effectively entering the circle of an academic institution on the professorial level.

From the perspective of a discipline that had reached such impressive standards in the German-speaking world, Pevsner observed and assessed the practice of art history in the cultural sphere into which his skills would have to be transferred. He quickly had to give up hope of finding a position with similar status to that of a *Privatdozent* within an art history department and of putting his career back on the same tracks, because he was confronted with a completely different mentality. For instance, the Courtauld Institute, created in 1932, was the first place where he found work, and yet his opinion of it was rather severe: 'The Courtauld doesn't give much impression of a serious German-style approach. All girls, and they can present themselves for examination after one year. The courses are all far too short and not very thorough.'¹³ Having left a thriving art history department, he could only be critical of the standards to which he was told to teach, and of the

¹¹ Pinder, 31.05.1933: '[Pevsner] ist mit dem Leben der deutschen Wissenschaft aufs Tiefste verbunden, er besitzt aber zugleich eine allgemeine Offenheit für alle grossen Fragen des geschichtlichen und des heutigen Lebens.'

¹² Percy Ernst Schramm, Cover letter, 12.10.1933, SPSL Archive: 'Man darf wohl sagen, dass die deutsche Kunstgeschichte in den letzten 30 Jahren eines der lebendigsten Gebiets überhaupt gewesen ist, und dass hier besonders die Geisteswissenschaft vorwärtsgetrieben wurde; so könnte ich mir denken, dass ein Mann wie Pevsner, der diese ganze Schule in sich aufgenommen hat und sie nun in selbständiger Weise weiter entwickelt nicht nur ein refugie wäre, für den man aus Grossherzigkeit etwas tut, sondern einer, der etwas Eigenes und Förderndes hinüberbringt.'

¹³ Nikolaus Pevsner to Carola (Lola) Pevsner, 31.10.1933, quoted in Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, 139. (Harries' translation.)

network of experts and art connoisseurs who, he soon found out, were the closest British equivalent of *Kunstgeschichte* as he knew it. He anticipated some difficulties with an upcoming talk at the Courtauld: 'This one is going to be rather dense. How will people take it? I see again and again with astonishment, and sometimes with horror, how different the lectures on art usually are here.'¹⁴

One of the experts with which Pevsner compared himself was Kenneth Clark, the director of the National Gallery. The refugee art historian attended a lecture on Leonardo da Vinci and was appalled at some of the statements he heard:

I detect a lot of work on the originals - but the tenor of it is an arrogance for which I could box his ears. 'Leonardo shouldn't have done this', 'That was a waste of time', and then rather *blasé* jokes in between to make the students laugh. (...) This gang just want to retain their own self, their tastes, their own style, at any price even in front of the work of art. There isn't the real passion of our best scholars. (...) Will they accept the way I do it or not. I certainly shan't change it. I am convinced, time and time again, it just seems obvious - our way is better.¹⁵

As a trained *Kunsthistoriker*, who in Germany had placed himself at the forefront of a new generation keen to give solid foundations to an autonomous discipline,¹⁶ Pevsner was aware of the gap separating him from his British colleagues: 'every sentence, every lecture, every book, every conversation means something else here compared to ours. The words mean different things, the convolutions of the brain are different'.¹⁷ He disapproved of the connoisseurs ('this gang') who claimed the right to establish a hierarchy among works of art and styles and to form a self-proclaimed elite. Pevsner clearly distinguished between 'them' and 'us' and asserted his belonging to the German-speaking culture of historiography (which he proudly calls 'our way'), a position of principle that he did not intend to change, even to secure a real position in an English-speaking university. Thus, from his discourse emerged the image of a discipline, albeit a young one, that was homogeneous and

¹⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner to Carola, 1934, the Estate of Nikolaus Pevsner: '[Es wird] wieder eine haarige Arbeit. Wie die Leute es wohl aufnehmen werden? Ich sehe doch immer wieder mit Staunen und manchmal mit Entsetzen, wie anders hier Vorlesungen über Kunst sind.'

¹⁵ Pevsner, 1934, ENP: 'Es steckt sehr viel eigene Arbeit an den Originalen drin, aber der Tenor ist eine Arroganz, dass ich ihn immer ohrfeigen könnte. L. hätte dass und jenes nicht tun sollen, das war nur Zeitverschwendung usw., und kühle Scherze dazwischen, dass die Studenten lachen. (...) Diese Bande will eben ihr eigenes Selbst, ihren Geschmack, ihren Stil auf jeden Fall auch vor dem Kunstwerk erhalten. Es gibt nicht die Leidenschaft, mit der die Besten bei uns sich ins Zeug legen. (...) Wird es ihnen recht sein, wie ich's mache oder nicht. Ich andre es bestimmt nicht. Und ich glaube immer wieder, es ist zu augenfällig, dass unsre Art besser ist.'

¹⁶ See, for instance, Nikolaus Pevsner's review of *Die Bedeutung der ästhetischen Grenze für die Methode der Kunstgeschichte* by Ernst Michalski in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1933, 40–44, in which he praised the author's contribution to the debate on the appropriate direction for the discipline of art history.

¹⁷ Pevsner, 30.09.1934, ENP: 'jeder Satz, jede Vorlesung, jedes Buch, jede Unterhaltung bedeutet hier einfach etwas anderes als bei uns. Die Worte heissen etwas anderes, die Gehirnwindungen laufen anders.'

that aspired to base the study of art on strict scientific principles. It seems however that this alleged homogeneity of *Kunstgeschichte* was projected by Pevsner for polemical purpose to present a united front against what he thought was the adversary of art history in Britain. Pevsner's personal, strongly polemical view on connoisseurship must not hide the fact that it was also a strand in German-speaking historiography more generally, as shown in the contemporary work of Max Friedländer, whose book *Von Kunst und Kennerschaft* was very successful in its English translation in 1942.¹⁸ This strand found resonance in William Constable's *Art History and Connoisseurship, their Scope and Method* of 1938, in which an art historian was defined as a historian specialising in art by using the indispensable tools of connoisseurship.¹⁹ Even Kenneth Clark, who Pevsner singled out as the archetype of the connoisseur, stated in his autobiography the impact that the discovery of Aby Warburg's teaching in 1929 had had on his conception of art studies.²⁰ The reception of German-speaking scholarship in Britain was thus more differentiated than Pevsner's partial opinions might lead us to think and the opposition of the concepts of the connoisseur and the art historian loses of its relevance in view of both Clark's acknowledgement of Warburg, and of the strong ties that the Warburg and the Courtauld were to develop, albeit with a strong element of specialised erudition that prevented them from becoming a platform for the broader diffusion of art history. What was lacking in Britain, then, was actually the institutional framework for the development of art history as an autonomous discipline in universities.

The reality of Pevsner's displacement was probably tougher than he had expected. At the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom, there were only three Professorships in art history. In spite of his outstanding profile, and even without demanding a position as a professor (a post that he had not even reached in Germany), Pevsner faced a very limited number of options in his field. In a letter dated February 1934, he made a list of the lectures that he had managed to secure after a few months of searching, to justify his application for an extension of his permit:

My course at the Courtauld Institute goes from Feb. 12th till Feb. 21st. Beyond that I shall lecture at Armstrong College Newcastle on Febr. 26th, at Ruskin College Oxford Febr. 28th, Birmingham University March 6th, F. College Birmingham March 11th, University College London May 1st till 3rd.²¹

This list illustrates the sense of restlessness of his search for a new place, which made him evoke a 'longing for the ability to work in peace'. He had so far been

¹⁸ Max Friedländer, *Von Kunst und Kennerschaft*. Zurich: Sperber, 1939 and *On Art and Connoisseurship*, London: Cassirer, 1941.

¹⁹ See William Constable, *Art History and Connoisseurship, their Scope and Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938, 3ff.

²⁰ See Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood: A Self Portrait*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 189ff.

²¹ Pevsner to the AAC, February 1934, SPSL Archive.

doing exactly the right thing and could not retrieve his previous status without the appropriate working conditions: 'How far are the days when I would prepare at leisure for new subjects, read and write books!' On the other hand, the precariousness of his various positions had a negative impact on his work: 'These silly lectures in London - just gibberish, for money. (...) In my own eyes, (...), I am nothing, less than nothing.'²²

Pevsner's first months in Britain were like a vicious circle that prevented him from producing new research and keeping abreast of German-speaking scholarship. His correspondence of the time is pervaded with a sense of frustration and the awareness of having lost his social place with the loss of his employment. It is very interesting that reading a book by Gottfried Benn triggered the following remarks:

I was thinking, (...) that I am here to reach a middle-class, assured position, instead of struggling all over the place. Yet how could I have stayed in my position in Germany where I was refused the right to occupy it. I could do so much now. Everything I read is just the kind of thing I would like to do myself. Should I have hung on and imposed myself?²³

Founding an Institution: from *Kunstgeschichte* to Art History?

At the time of Pevsner's migration to England, the absence of art history as an autonomous academic discipline was a topic that preoccupied several British scholars. For instance, his critical view on the professional environment that he discovered on arrival had already been expressed in a rather similar tone by Roger Fry, who was mostly known as an art critic. Fry was also an artist himself, the founder of the Omega Workshops, and an active member of the Bloomsbury Group. He had started to teach what he considered to be art history in the 1900s in London, and he was appointed Cambridge Slade Professor in 1933. It is important to say, however, that the Slade Professorship was dedicated to the teaching of 'fine arts'. In his inaugural lecture, entitled *Art-History as an academic Study*, Fry started off by introducing himself with the qualification: 'Although I am a Professor, I am still somewhat of an outsider.'²⁴ This statement appears constantly in Pevsner, but one can wonder why a British scholar would use this expression: it is not a national divide that is implied here, but a cultural one. Fry was an outsider in British academia of the 1930s in as much as he championed teaching and research on art history, a point of view that remained an exception. This he explained by cultural factors going back to the Victorian age 'which regarded any attempt to think or talk

²² Quoted in Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: the Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, 161.

²³ Pevsner, 01.05.1934, ENP: 'Und nun denke ich: (...) dass ich hier bin, um eine bürgerliche und gesicherte Position zu erreichen, anstatt mich irgendwo herumzuschlagen. Aber wie könnte ich denn in Deutschland auf meinem Posten stehen, wo man mir das Recht abspricht, auf ihm zu stehen. Ich könnte so viel tun, jetzt. Alles was ich lese, ist genau dem entsprechend, was ich selbst tun würde. Hätte ich also irgendwie doch ausharren und mich aufdrängen müssen?'

²⁴ Roger Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study (an inaugural Lecture delivered in the Senate House)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933, 5.

seriously about Art as ridiculous' and showed 'suspicion'²⁵ towards attempts to tackle art with scientific tools. This suspicion, he thinks, had turned into 'indifference' in British universities by the beginning of the twentieth century.

The model on which he based his criticism of British universities was, unsurprisingly, Germany, to which he compared them severely:

For about 100 years German Universities have made courses in Art-History a regular part of their *curricula*, and yet here, although the study of the art of letters has always formed a large part of our University education, (...) no opportunities for the study of the visual arts have ever been offered by British Universities until last year, when the Courtauld Institute opened its doors.²⁶

Roger Fry was a cosmopolitan intellectual, open to the transfer of foreign models if it could help his practice progress towards the formation of an academic subject. He put a case for the institutionalisation of the discipline through the setting up of a faculty of art history in Cambridge that would deal with what he saw as 'a crying need for systematic study in which scientific methods will be followed wherever possible, where at all event the scientific attitude may be fostered and the sentimental attitude discouraged.'²⁷ The study of art, instead of a stagnating British tradition in which scholars are, to Fry's mind, 'so terribly ignorant', should adopt the methodical, truly scientific attitude demonstrated by the Germans, within the framework of a university, in order to be able to make 'aesthetic judgments of universal validity'. In Fry's statements appears the other side of the 'us and them' rhetoric that was previously shown in Pevsner's correspondence. The British intellectual also had a low opinion of the community of those who study art: 'when this question of Beauty comes in, we find ourselves in a world of strong convictions based on no demonstrable reasons, (...) we behave much more like the theologians of past time than like men of science of to-day.'²⁸

In the early 1950s, Pevsner was given the opportunity to look back on the British part of his career and to take stock of the progress of art history as a discipline. By this time, he held a permanent position as lecturer at Birkbeck College, London, and had been appointed Slade Professor in Cambridge in 1949, the same position that Roger Fry had held fifteen years before. In Pevsner's case, this situation could be interpreted as a clear sign of him having successfully accomplished several rites of passages through which, as an *émigré* scholar, he 'found a place' in academia and regained a secure professional sense of self. He was invited to take part in a radio show broadcast on the BBC in 1952 as part of a series on art, a document which allows for a relevant comparison to be made with the

²⁵ Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, 7.

²⁶ Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, 7-8.

²⁷ Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, 10.

²⁸ Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, 10.

cultural deficiency in British universities described by Fry in 1933, since both art historians specifically reflect on their teaching in Cambridge.

Fifteen years after Roger Fry, Pevsner also introduced his talk with an emphasis on his place in between two cultures: 'I am speaking to you tonight as a rank outsider. I have not been to a public school, nor to Oxford or Cambridge, although I am now - pro tem - as happy at Cambridge as anyone.'²⁹ Teaching at Cambridge provided Pevsner with the high social status that he regretted having lost after migrating, but did not fulfil what his upbringing had taught him was his vocation. Signs of acceptance could not make up for the fact that he remained an 'outsider'. Indeed, his choice of title seems to indicate that he judged his experience more on its shortcomings than its achievements. The talk was called 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art history', a somewhat unusual activity, that he described as follows:

I can be lazy at Cambridge. For so my job decrees it. You see, I am not teaching at Cambridge. At Cambridge I am appointed to stand on a platform and talk about all that fascinates me. However, in the middle of all these delights, a voice quite often whispers that I should teach, I should get hold of those who are really keenly, vitally interested in my subject and see what I can do for them, what I can do with them.³⁰

Trained as an art historian, Pevsner longed for the possibility of institutionalising the transmission of knowledge, of giving a framework to his research and that of his students, because lectures and seminars provided him with a stage for a fruitful exchange of ideas. He felt the urge to go beyond mere entertainment, even though he acknowledged the simple pleasure he felt in talking to an audience. In his opinion, it was his responsibility, his duty, to make art history happen, in front of and among his students. Art history as a discipline could only happen if the possibility existed for posterity and continuity in training of content and methods. The distinction is clear in Pevsner's mind: 'my subject, the history of art and architecture, does not exist at Cambridge as an academic subject pursued to attain a degree and start a professional career. Nor does it exist at Oxford.'³¹ He deplored this state of affairs all the more, since he noticed that it was highly regarded and considered a full academic subject everywhere else in the world. Naming places in the United States, in Argentina, Holland and Sweden, he claimed: 'Everywhere the History of Art is established as an academic subject; only in Britain it isn't. In Germany, which I know best, there have been chairs for a hundred years and more, and for fifty they have existed at nearly every one of the twenty and more universities.'³²

Far from challenging Pevsner's criticism, his colleague Ellis Waterhouse took up the argument in the following talk of the series and acknowledged the cultural discrepancy even down to the meaning of the words 'art history' themselves:

²⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Reflections on not teaching art history', in *Pevsner on Art and Architecture: the Radio Talks*, Stephen Games, ed., London: Methuen, 2002, 155.

³⁰ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 155.

³¹ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 155.

³² Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 155-156

Prof. Pevsner dealt gently with us last week. By 'us', I mean we English who have anything to do with the world of teaching, and perhaps the taught also. Having been educated in what we, as if we were the Greeks, call 'Europe', he spoke quite naturally as if such expression as 'art historian' and the 'history of art' had really found root in the English language. Yet I wonder if any native Englishman over forty has not a sneaking feeling that such phrases are really not quite officially correct and describe somebody or something which does not quite exist with us, except as a rare migrant whose recorded appearances are becoming more numerous.³³

Roger Fry had highlighted a similar problem in his 1933 speech: 'The mere fact that we have no convenient word by which to designate that body of studies which the Germans call *Kunstforschung* - a body of studies of which the actual history of Art is only a part - is significant. I am obliged to use the awkward and inadequate word "Art-History" for it.'³⁴ There seems to be some reluctance in the British language itself to assimilate the concept of a history of art that would take the shape of a discipline. However, having given his point of view on the current situation, later on in the talk, Waterhouse defended the potential of what in Britain was still an emerging discipline, and just as Pevsner had done, proposed to connect it with the teaching of history:

[There is] no reason why art history should not naturally take its place beside the other historical disciplines, why art history should not be considered a piece, and a necessary piece, of history. This is indeed what has happened throughout the rest of the western world, except only in England. The reasons for this seem to me to lie, not in art history itself, but in something in our national psychology.³⁵

Three years later, in his study *The Englishness of English Art*, Pevsner would analyse the English 'national psychology' in art, and here can be observed what might be called a national psychology of scholarly practice. Even if Waterhouse agreed that art history should be taught on a larger scale in British universities, in his talk he embraced the essential characteristics that Pevsner had noticed in the 1930s among British scholars. When asked what his profession was, Waterhouse admitted to regularly answering 'art critic' to avoid confusion. Thus, it appears that in Britain in the 1950s there was still no collective awareness of a group who could refer to themselves as art historians, for there existed neither an institutional structure nor a vocabulary to create an exchange of ideas and concepts. There was nonetheless a noticeable change of attitude towards the situation, which was no

³³ Ellis Waterhouse, 'Art as a 'Piece of History' ', *The Listener*, 06.11.1952, 761.

³⁴ Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, 8.

³⁵ Waterhouse, 'Art as a 'Piece of History'', 762.

longer taken for granted. After his BBC talk, Pevsner received several letters, including the following, from Jack Goodison, Keeper of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge: 'It is a real misfortune that we have so little teaching in this subject, the English amateur tradition seems to have got its teeth very deeply into it.'³⁶ Ernst Gombrich, who was Slade Professor in Oxford at the time, also wrote to Pevsner: 'Everything you said about (...) your main topic, on not teaching Art History, I found really admirable'.³⁷ As an *émigré* scholar himself, Gombrich could relate to the frustrations and sense of a career severed from its native environment. There were voices in favour of developing an academic community of art history. Was *Kunstgeschichte* then the only viable model?

In the second part of the 1952 talk, Pevsner sketched the outline of a history of German art history, undoubtedly, for him, the best model on which to base the discipline in the United Kingdom. His intention was perhaps to show how not to teach art history but how to teach *Kunstgeschichte* instead. According to Pevsner, the genealogy of *Kunstgeschichte* started with scholars of cultural history such as Franz Kugler and Jacob Burckhardt, whose volume on the art history of the Italian Renaissance³⁸ he called 'entirely history of art proper'.³⁹ Of Burckhardt's pupil Heinrich Wölfflin, he said: 'the history of art finally discovered itself'.⁴⁰ The decision to place the roots of art history in cultural history might have been to avoid putting off an audience who would dismiss as being 'foreign' pure philosophy of beauty or aesthetics as the origin of art. In any case, it does not seem to be the way Pevsner saw the roots of his own discipline.

The moment of the constitution of a discipline and, along with it, of a collective identity of the art historian, may be found in this generation from 1890 to the beginning of the twentieth century, a generation that included Alois Riegl and August Schmarsow, who happened to be Pinder's professor in Leipzig. The crucial turning point in art history was accomplished with the emphasis put by these scholars on the analysis of style, an innovation 'which won its independence'⁴¹ for the discipline. As part of his demonstration, Pevsner grouped names that had traditionally been opposed in the history of art history (Riegl and Wölfflin). Here, there is apparently an attempt to reach a synthesis and to create a coherent narrative for an audience of non-specialists. One might also see in it the desire to present a united front, based on the sense that German-speaking art historians should appear as a community. Wölfflin's definition of style as 'formal characteristics which all significant works of art of one period have in common'⁴² became the basis for the

³⁶ Jack Goodison to Nikolaus Pevsner, 17.11.1952, Nikolaus Pevsner Papers 840209 1/2, Getty Research Institute.

³⁷ Ernst Gombrich to Nikolaus Pevsner, 19.10.1952, Nikolaus Pevsner Papers 840209 1/2, Getty Research Institute, Gombrich's emphasis.

³⁸ Jacob Burckhardt, *Geschichte der Renaissance in Italien*, Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1878. This essay was later published under the title *Die Kunst der Renaissance in Italien* as volume 6 of the complete works of Burckhardt, edited by Heinrich Wölfflin, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1932.

³⁹ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 157.

⁴⁰ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 157.

⁴¹ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 158.

⁴² Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 158.

elaboration of art history's own methods that in turn gave it the legitimacy of being a subject in its own right. However, Pevsner claimed that research on formalism presented the danger of 'the artificiality of isolating formal aspects', which led to a reaction: 'a new interest in *iconography*', or as he called it, '*subjectology*',⁴³ which he associated with Aby Warburg and the Institute named after him. He warned however that iconographical research could end up at the other extreme, as 'only a catalogue of species and subspecies'.⁴⁴

Having presented the situation of German history of art in the first decades of the twentieth century as an oscillation between two tendencies, Pevsner introduced the only possible compromise: 'all changes in iconography, as all changes in style, are only the signs of far deeper changes in *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of ages.'⁴⁵ The structure of this sentence symbolises in a nutshell the transfer of which Pevsner is a major agent: giving the concept in German and its translation in the same breath, he intended to ease the transition of the idea into the English language. The existence of a common code would be vital to the transmission of his ideas, and he took great care in defining those notions that were new to an English ear. The same principle applied to what, in his opinion, had become the major branch of art history, funded in Vienna: 'Max Dvořák established what he called *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, history of art as history of the mind'.⁴⁶ One can read within this general outline the major strands of his own historical practice, fuelled by an ongoing reflection on the expression of the *Zeitgeist* in national art forms. While he didn't fully reject the British way of studying art, his confrontation of the well-trodden German path with what he presented as British amateurism was meant to raise awareness of the need to catch up on the progress of the discipline. If evidence was needed to confirm that this remained his interpretation of the history of German-speaking art history, one could be referred again to Gombrich's letter:

I would not be a genuine colleague if I could agree with every single formulation concerning the 'culture' of one tribe. I feel that Warburg was not just an iconographer, I think I have inherited from my teacher Schlosser something of the old man's cautious reserve regarding Dvořák's later *Geistesgeschichte*.⁴⁷

Beyond the understandable variation of views resulting from the two men's different backgrounds as students, Gombrich also expressed - albeit perhaps in a slight ironic tone - the sense of belonging to a community of scholars, which he called 'tribe'. The question that all *émigré* scholars have to answer at some point after arriving in their new country is indeed how to survive without the tribe in which

⁴³ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 159, Pevsner's emphasis.

⁴⁴ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 159.

⁴⁵ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 159.

⁴⁶ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 159..

⁴⁷ Gombrich to Pevsner, 19.10.1952.

their work had been consecrated. Pevsner's proposal to Britain was, with his guidance, to perpetuate and emulate the rituals of his very own tribe.

Projecting oneself: the transfer in retrospect

While paying homage to his tribe by writing its history, Pevsner also maintained a link with it and tried to preserve his place in the line of German-speaking scholars. When he first came to Great Britain, there was a need to preserve a continuity with Germany in the hope that he could recover his place in the emerging generation of art historians. Later, in writings in which he reflected on his career, the process of introspection became retrospection to assess what his place had been in scholarship.

When he first wrote to the Academic Assistance Council in 1933, Pevsner enquired about 'the possibilities of finding an employment abroad' and made the first brief description of himself in English that we possess:

As I am a *Privatdozent* for the history of art and architecture, and was too young to have taken part in the war, I must expect to lose (sic) my *venia legendi* under the new anti-semitic laws. The work for which I am specially trained is history of art (...), and I would be willing to go to any part of Europe, America or the British Dominions (sic) in which I could find suitable employment. Besides I consider that I would be able to act as German *Lektor* in any University in the world.⁴⁸

Though of course the German words used in the university context were probably familiar to the members of the SPSL, who had to deal with a lot of applicants' files, it is remarkable that Pevsner wrote about the concepts that formed his everyday world directly in German (*Privatdozent*, *Lektor*) or in the Latin '*venia legendi*'. For young scholars, the latter was really the symbol of their accession to the realm of academia, the title acquired after their formative years.⁴⁹ In his hesitant English, Pevsner has a rather interesting way of presenting his change of status: more than the dismissal, which remains implicit, it is the loss of the '*venia legendi*' that is put forward. 'Find suitable employment' clearly meant to him the equivalent of the place he had had to leave in the discipline of art history. Thrown into a precarious situation, first in the 1930s and then again during the Second World War, Pevsner reassessed his ambitions and the meaning of 'suitable employment' changed to whatever he could find to provide for his family, provided that it was at least remotely related to art, architecture and design. The conclusion of his 1952 BBC talk reveals his general sentiment on the evolution of his career: in his migration, he has not been able to displace his own status as a *Kunsthistoriker*. Describing himself as 'a general practitioner',⁵⁰ he implied a failure because, unlike German scholars, he did not get the chance to become a specialist in a particular subject:

⁴⁸ Pevsner to the AAC, 05.07.1933, SPSL.

⁴⁹ See Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1919, 474ff.

⁵⁰ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 160.

My own work, you can take it from me, is entirely eclectic and yet seems to meet a demand. A book on the history of art academies, that is social history of art; papers on the religious and historical foundations of Mannerism and Baroque in Italy, that is *Geistesgeschichte*; a treatment of architectural evolution in terms of space, and so on. Nothing that had not been done before.⁵¹

In order to illustrate the eclecticism of his work, Pevsner listed what were actually primary aspects of his research in the early part of his career in an off-hand, almost dismissive way. Each of these examples could have led to him breaking new ground in his domain. The expression 'general practitioner' is almost derogatory in comparison with this idea of being leader in a field. After twenty years in his new environment, Pevsner still assessed himself by the German definition of his discipline. Or at least, he seemed to struggle to come to terms with the British criteria of the study of art history, according to which his research, after all, had responded to a demand and met with some degree of recognition, in the form of a Slade Professorship and a place as a BBC broadcaster.

Many signs can actually be listed of the place Pevsner had attained in British scholarship by the end of his career. The publication of a bibliography and of a *Festschrift*, the award of the Gold medal of the Research Institute of British Architects in 1967 and a knighthood in 1969 for 'services to art and architecture' can be seen as rites of passage, through which he gained the status of an 'established scholar' or even of a cultural institution. His writings in reaction to these many acknowledgements of his success, such texts being traditionally the place for retrospection, are marked by a sense of nostalgia and of incompleteness. A closer look at the 1967 RIBA speech, the foreword of the bibliography compiled by John Barr in 1970, and the introduction to *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design* published in 1968, shows that Pevsner's biography is constantly intertwined with the story of German history of art, even though his trajectory shows a difference of emphasis to the outline he presented in the 1952 talk. The main distinction from the general story of art history is the weight given to the field of the history of architecture in his profile: 'Growing up into an architectural historian in Germany in the early 1920s was an experience entirely different from that which one would have undergone in England or France.'⁵² The phrase 'grow up' emphasises the organic link to a discipline that was much more than just a profession. Pevsner came to occupy an assigned place in a community by nurturing certain skills with the help of the previous generation, starting with an unmissable reference: 'Heinrich Wölfflin was a matter of course. I read him while still at school, for I knew that history of art would be my profession.'⁵³ This presents all the characteristics of a vocation, even of a calling and reinforces our assumption that the study of art history was an essential

⁵¹ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 160.

⁵² Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Foreword', in John Barr, *Sir Nikolaus Pevsner: A Bibliography*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970, viii.

⁵³ Pevsner, 'Foreword', viii.

component of *Bildung* and the constant quest for improvement of the self. In many places in these later texts, Pevsner also evokes the memory of Wilhelm Pinder, to whom he claimed to owe his vocation, calling him a 'mentor' or an 'exemplar': '[He] was a brilliant lecturer, with resources of dazzling ideas and comparisons, and a scholar who thought and felt in terms of *Zeitgeist* and national or regional styles.'⁵⁴ These concepts were at the core of Pevsner's scholarship, in connection with what he called geography of art, defined as the studying of national characteristics in art.

In these later writings can be found the sketching of an alternative outline of German-speaking historiography, in which the angle is this time less pedagogical than personal. While in 1952 Pevsner had considered the birthing of modern art history from the objective perspective of the historian to educate a British audience in the fundamentals of the discipline, by the late 1960s, since he was reflecting on his career, the line of descent of scholars that he sketched out included himself. Thus, in 1967, he retrospectively presented his mentor Pinder as the final link of what he called an 'apostolic succession'⁵⁵ starting with Robert Vischer and his work on *Einführung*. He defined the concept, introduced first in German in the text, as 'the beholder's "feeling himself into the work of art" and thus experiencing its meaning'⁵⁶ in the RIBA Speech, and in the foreword to his bibliography, as 'what we now call empathy'.⁵⁷ The second definition with its use of an English word and of the first person plural seems to indicate the growing acclimatisation of the concept in the British part of his career. Following Vischer, he added Wilhelm Worringer, then Theodor Lipps, to a chain leading on to the work of August Schmarsow, through the analysis of the notion of space in architecture, and from then it passed to Schmarsow's pupil Pinder. While Pinder had been omnipresent in his scholarship, Pevsner felt the need to belatedly acknowledge his debt to Schmarsow: 'my peculiar Leipzig initiation was more than I knew for a long time due to Pinder's predecessor August Schmarsow, still far too little known in Anglo-American circles.'⁵⁸ In particular, the discovery 'that space is the distinguishing medium of the architect'⁵⁹ inspired the structure of *An Outline of European Architecture*, the first book that Pevsner wrote in England: '[Allen Lane] asked me to write a paperback history of European architecture, I tried to make space its focal point - a very belated tribute to the Schmarsow-Pinder past - but to stress social history as well without neglecting history of style.'⁶⁰ His ambition to combine study of *Einführung* in architecture, in terms of space, with social history of art and history of style might be a sign of his wish to avoid letting go of any thread that could still connect him to this succession of scholars, of which, being one of Pinder's most promising pupils, he had been next in line. Yet he had to combine this ambition with the more and more urgent problem of 'starting afresh in England', that forced him to reconsider the direction he should give to his scholarship: 'In what ways could a historian of art

⁵⁴ Pevsner, 'Foreword', vii.

⁵⁵ 'Nikolaus Pevsner 1967 Royal Gold Medallist', *RIBA Journal*, August 1967, 318.

⁵⁶ 'Nikolaus Pevsner 1967 Royal Gold Medallist', *RIBA Journal*, 318.

⁵⁷ Pevsner, 'Foreword', viii.

⁵⁸ Pevsner, 'Foreword', viii.

⁵⁹ Pevsner, 'Reflections on Not Teaching Art History', 158.

⁶⁰ Pevsner, 'Foreword', xi.

of German upbringing and mentality be useful to England? What, especially in architectural history, which I more and more specialized in, was lacking?’⁶¹

One attempt to stay in line with his ‘German upbringing’ while creating a place for himself in the British cultural landscape was his series on English architecture, a work that took him more than twenty years to complete. His retelling of the genesis of *The Buildings of England* gives a very ambiguous impression: on the one hand, it feels like it should have been his masterpiece, the work whose authorship would have made his mark in British academia. The pattern was to be ‘Georg Dehio’s *Handbuch der deutschen Kunstdenkmäler*’, but he clearly stated his aim to improve on it: ‘I intended to go beyond Dehio in two ways: length and autopsy.’⁶² Beyond the projected fulfilment of a scholarly plan as ambitious as German historiography, there also was Pevsner’s habit of getting involved in the cultural life of his new country: ‘I had always felt the necessity of such an enterprise, i.e. of providing for England what Dehio had done in 1905-12 for Germany, but of providing it in much greater detail.’⁶³ In retrospect, he ultimately seems to have considered that this commitment took over the time he should have dedicated to research, and his statements are full of self-doubt:

Whether I was right in committing myself to *Buildings of England* at the expense of all else is a moot point. There are pros and cons. The pro is that the layman and the scholar need such a comprehensive compilation, the con is that it is a compilation and that, in the absence of first-hand research and under the pressure of time, it is a faulty compilation.⁶⁴

With the change of context came the need for a new audience and for an adapted discourse, for ‘a turn from writing for scholars to writing for laymen.’⁶⁵ Although Pevsner does not explicitly lament this evolution, his constant weighing of pros and cons is revealing of his difficulty in finding satisfaction when reviewing his career: ‘The difference is not necessarily one of level, it can also be one of presentation. Positively speaking it may mean a shedding of abracadabra. Negatively I need not speak; for the dangers are patent.’⁶⁶ Another sign of this sense of incompleteness comes from reading his views on *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*. These two volumes are within the tradition of *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, a type of publication that gathers together the various threads of a scholar’s work and generally engenders the idea of a clearly defined direction or set of directions in a career, since the collected essays are deemed worthy of being preserved for posterity. Yet Pevsner’s view of

⁶¹ Pevsner, ‘Foreword’, xi.

⁶² Pevsner, ‘Foreword’, xi.

⁶³ Nikolaus Pevsner, Foreword, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design I: From Mannerism to Romanticism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1968, 8.

⁶⁴ Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design I*, 8.

⁶⁵ Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design I*, 8.

⁶⁶ Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design I*, 8.

his own body of work is rather derogatory and marked by the sense of a decrease in quality:

The papers represented in these two volumes stretch over a period of nearly forty years. To prepare them for re-publication allowed me, or forced me, to endeavour an objective assessment of their contents and also their significance for me and perhaps for others. They started in Germany and end in England; (...) they started with scholarship and end in what strikes me often as superficiality. The substance, to put it in another way, tends to get thinner.⁶⁷

One can ponder the 'objective assessment' made by the displaced scholar of the consequences of his displacement on the whole of his scholarly input: the 'us and them' contrast endured even until this compilation stage. 'Scholarship' means depth and substance, two qualities that Pevsner thought he had failed to reach. He adopted a similar posture of humility when introducing the bibliography compiled by John Barr in 1968: 'The bibliography that follows - which seems to me to take far too seriously the writings, often casual, of one man - shows that my serious scholarly work has gone thin since *The Building of England* series started.'⁶⁸ Here again, the adjective 'casual' is damning for an art historian who had been trained at the best universities in Germany.

Conclusion

Pevsner's self-criticism may be put into perspective by means of a comparison with those colleagues with a similar experience of migration to English-speaking countries who, for him, successfully accomplished the transition into another environment and remained true *Kunsthistoriker*, in spite of the rupture in their careers in the 1930s:

My treatment of [architectural history] is what the French would call *divulgation*. This is in contrast to the work of a few friends and colleagues who have really propelled the history of art and architecture. One of them is Rudolf Wittkower who wrote his *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* purely as a scholarly exercise and did not know for a moment that what he was writing was of immediate importance to the whole of the architects of the Smithsons' generation. The other is Ernst Gombrich. His approach to art through the psychology of perception came at a moment when artists were in the most urgent need of psychological guidance in the confusion in which they found themselves. And so it also swept the board. I have done nothing of that urgency.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design I*, 8.

⁶⁸ Pevsner, 'Foreword', xi.

⁶⁹ 'Nikolaus Pevsner 1967 Royal Gold Medallist', *RIBA Journal*, 318.

In another place, Pevsner writes: 'I know that I have nowhere propelled my subject - like the Warburg circle and like Ernst Gombrich' though he hopes 'to have recognized some needs and provisionally fulfilled them.'⁷⁰ The Warburg Institute and Ernst Gombrich symbolised the perpetuation of a school in another culture within an institution that protected them, whereas Pevsner's path as an isolated scholar was more dependent on the search for, and in many cases the creation of, a target audience for his research. This might explain the pedagogical strand in his writings on the history of art history and his attempt to create a German art-historical canon intelligible for a British audience, through putting forward some authors who were less prominent in his personal list of the models whom he wished to emulate (although, in his opinion, he had failed to do so).

The point of this paper was to assess how Pevsner perceived the process of transfer of his discipline and the outcome of this process at various stages of his career. Clearly, one is aware of the art historian's disproportionately negative attitude towards his own work, which led him to make highly critical statements, at odds with the more common image of him as an eminent scholar, who was sometimes praised as the most famous – if at times controversial⁷¹ – art historian in Britain. Here might be the crux: Pevsner measured his achievement against a standard that was deeply embedded in his 'German upbringing and mentality' – or what he projected as these values from the point of view of an immigrant to a different cultural sphere - and deeply resented the fact that his career fell short of this standard on the measures of publication, thoroughness, and seriousness of the scholarship, which prevented him from seeing himself as a *Kunsthistoriker* in Britain. However, since his assessment was based on what was necessarily a very precise definition of what a *Kunsthistoriker* should be, born out of his confrontation with another tradition of scholarship, we have reasons to believe that this did not necessarily mean that he had failed in becoming an art historian outside Germany.

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⁷⁰ Pevsner, 'Foreword', xi.

⁷¹ The most famous of these controversies was launched by David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* in 1977. Watkin criticised Pevsner's approach to art and architectural history, in particular his use of the concept of *Zeitgeist* to promote the transfer of the Modern movement in Britain. See David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture: The Development of a Theme in architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 and David, Watkin *Morality and Architecture Revisited*, London: John Murray, 2001.

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