

WAR AND LITERATURE: A GENEALOGY OF SHAME IN POSTWAR NORWAY

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ABSTRACT. This paper elaborates a genealogy of shame in postwar Norway through the analysis of three literary works: Sigurd Hoel's *Møte ved milepelen* (*Meeting at the Milestone*, 1947), Knut Hamsun's *Paa gjengrodde stier* (*On Overgrown Paths*, 1949), and Per Petterson's *Ut og stjele hester* (*Out Stealing Horses*, 2003). Understanding the ways in which collective shame has shaped the Norwegian national psyche is important not only because it allows us to qualify the ethical niche currently employed by Norway in the international arena, but also because it shows how the politics and aesthetics of shame are inherently related to both the nation and social justice.

Key Words: war, literature, shame, Norway, state emotionalism

The Second World War (WWII) is a formative event in the Norwegian national psyche and a well-established theme in Norwegian film and literature since 1945. The majority of war fictions and memoirs archive the heroic acts of the Norwegian Resistance for future generations. Some, however, work towards eliciting collective shame. In this paper, I will investigate the role of three seminal works in Norwegian literature in the economy of national shame in Norway: Sigurd Hoel's *Møte ved milepelen* (*Meeting at the Milestone*, 1947), Knut Hamsun's *Paa gjengrodde stier* (*On Overgrown Paths*, 1949), and Per Petterson's *Ut og stjele hester* (*Out Stealing Horses*, 2003). *Meeting at the Milestone* and *On Overgrown Paths* came out immediately after the war at a time when Norwegians were zealously involved in rebuilding their country and punishing those who collaborated with the Gestapo. Shaming the Norwegian nation, each in its own way, these two novels are also symptomatic of the selective amnesia and emotional numbness characteristic of postwar Norway.

The international community celebrates Norway as an avid supporter of human rights and equality whose commitment to peace and democracy increased exponentially after WWII. Norway's clean reputation, however, is disturbed by a number of unsettling facts about the way in which the Norwegian authorities and public opinion dealt with those who betrayed the nation during the occupation, all from overt collaborators to children of war. Undermining Norway's ethical niche in the international arena, these past (mis)treatments have been pushed into the dark corners of national memory from where they occasionally return to haunt and shame the nation. An example of this is the renewed controversy about Hamsun's *On Overgrown Paths* and his dubious reputation as Norway celebrated the

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Hamsun jubilee in 2009. The third book I will analyze, *Out Stealing Horses*, won Per Petterson several prestigious international awards and the *New York Times Review* included it in its top-ten best books of 2007. My analysis will demonstrate that Petterson's contemporary novel reworks Norwegian postwar shame in ways that interrupt amnesia and numbness. In order to understand how experiences of war deform and reform the Norwegian national psyche, I therefore propose conducting a genealogy of shame in Norway through the above-mentioned literary works.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed (2004) demonstrates that utterances of shame play an important role in bringing the nation together. By uttering national shame at the wrongs committed by their political ancestors against the Aborigines, the Australian public and political elites celebrate the nation in the present through invoking national ideals that their ancestors failed to live up to. This not only leads to an idealization of the nation in the present, but also to the glossing over of present injustices. In other words, in Ahmed's example, utterances of shame allow the nation to feel better, while structures of power that have allowed atrocities and discrimination in the past continue to proliferate.

Central to Ahmed's discussion of what utterances of shame do to the nation is the definition of shame itself. Drawing on critics working within psychoanalysis, ego psychology, and phenomenology, Ahmed thrusts her argument through a conceptualization of shame in relation to guilt and love. Following Donald L. Nathanson, she suggests that guilt is about sanctioning, punishment for wrongdoing, and action: one feels guilty for what one has done. Shame, on the other hand, is about a quality of the self: one feels shame for what one is (Ahmed 105). Yet, according to Ahmed, shame is never a purely negative emotion. Rather it is a confirmation of love through negation: in order to experience shame before another, one must share an interest in that other, a prior love for that other or a desire to be like the other (Ahmed 105-6). Shame, then, is a proof of one's commitment to ideals, a proof of love:

If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practices of love.* What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love. (Ahmed 106)

By emphasizing the intimate relation between shame and love, Ahmed underlines the sociability of shame: through shame, we both acknowledge our failure to live up to the ideals that we share with others and uphold our desire to be one with the others, to be part of the family, the community or the nation. Ahmed is not the first one to identify the important role of shame in constructing and maintaining a collective ideal. Writing about guilt and shame in the feminist movement, Berenice Fisher (1984) recasts shame as a positive collective emotion that feminist intellectuals can and should mobilize in order to reassess their community's ability to live up to feminist ideals. By wearing shame together and reassessing their goals, feminists create a social bond that includes those other women whom their activism has traditionally failed, e.g. black women or women in the Global South. In the Australian case, however, the ambivalence of shame, simultaneously a confirmation and negation of love, implies that shame is conditional. Shame allows only white Australia to stick together by blaming their political ancestors for failing the national ideal. At the same time, it continues to exclude the other colored bodies such as Aborigines by exculpating white Australian contemporaries of individual guilt for continuing injustices and discrimination. Consequently, in Ahmed's account, shame as a shared affective state puts conditions on who can rightfully inhabit the nation and who cannot. It is this conditional dimension of collective shame that interests me in the Norwegian case. Who does shame put limits on? How does the Norwegian national body take shape through shame? Who is left out and who is left in through this shared affective state?

In postwar Norway, national shame is not healing, but debilitating, confusing, traumatic, chronic, entrapping, and intergenerational. In this way, it shares characteristics with what Kathleen Woodward (2009) has called racial shame. Discussing the racial structure of shame, Woodward demonstrates that racial shame cannot be readily transformed into knowledge like feminist or queer shame. Feminist epistemology has reclaimed shame as a self-reflexive psychological emotion that can be brought into consciousness through anger (Woodward 83-5). To feminists, the succession of shame by anger is key because anger is what allows women to recognize the oppression they have been part of. As to queer shame, Woodward, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, contends that it is transformed into pride through a supportive community and a politicized movement (85-7). In both of these examples, shame works as a positive force through the succeeding emotion: anger and pride respectively. In contrast, those who experience racial shame are not in the position of being able to analyze their own shame, like the feminists do; nor can they mobilize a community of their own, like in the case of queer activism. Instead, black shame in white America is traumatic and chronic, leading to lacerating violence and debilitating depression (Woodward 88).

Just like racial shame, national shame in Norway is chronic and traumatic, this time leading to emotional numbness and selective amnesia. For many Norwegians, WWII remains a taboo topic and utterances of national shame that demand authorities to issue an apology for unjust war settlements are few and far between. The heroic stories of the Norwegian Resistance are constantly pushed to the front, while the stories of the Norwegian collaborators with the Gestapo systematically silenced and forgotten.

A particularly sensitive topic is the fate of children born to a Norwegian parent, commonly a mother, and a Nazi occupier. To date, German Norwegian war children, now adults in their late sixties, continue to fight for redemption and compensation for the injustice and discrimination they have experienced since 1945. The Norwegian authorities have been responsive to the similar plea of indigenous Sami and national minorities such as the Kvens and the Romani, who have been subject to forcible assimilation and discrimination. In the case of war children, however, the Norwegian state has several times dismissed the war children's claims for compensation as outdated (Lengfelder 2010). The only official apology was issued in 2000 by Kjell Magne Bondevik, Norway's Prime Minister at the time. In his New Year's address, Bondevik briefly expressed his regrets on behalf of the Norwegian state for the unjust treatment of war children.

At the end of the war, there was an estimate of 10,000 to 12,000 German Norwegian war children whose mothers were vilified by both authorities and public opinion as "loose" women who had betrayed Norway by sleeping with the enemy (Ericsson and Simonsen 2008; Lenz 2009; Mochmann 2008). Offspring of "German tarts" and Nazis, these children were seen as hereditarily deficient and politically dangerous. Some went as far as to propose mass deportations of "Nazi brats" "back" to Germany. Although no war child act was ever passed in Norway and mass deportations of children were not conducted, the fate of these children was highly affected by the stigmatizing speech at the time. Many were put in orphanages and foster homes to get a "proper" Norwegian upbringing, while others later reported harassment, abuse, and social isolation. Their mothers were publicly ostracized by having their hair shorn and being fired, sexually abused, and socially harassed. Even worse, some of these women were interned in special camps, and those who had married a German during the war were stripped of their Norwegian citizenship and deported to Germany.

The treatment of war children illustrates the complex ways in which shame forges a national bond in postwar Norway. First, the Norwegian majority publicly shames their mothers as “loose women” and dooms them as unworthy of inhabiting the Norwegian national body. While deportation was not always a solution to rid the nation of all traitors, in the case of children of war, the Norwegian authorities employed other “corrective” measures such as forced adoption, social exclusion, and forcible assimilation. Second, shame entails not only an exposure of shameful traitors, but also a redemption of many other Norwegians who collaborated by default, such as farmers and fishermen who sold their produce to German troops. Consequently, shame involves an attempt to hide the failure of the Norwegian community to live up to its patriotic ideals. Third, fearing exposure and exclusion, the majority cannot resist the desire to hide and instead chooses to forget, deny, and ignore. The built-in critique of ideals and the potential for social transformation that Fisher ascribes to shame is not realized in the Norwegian case, for shame unifies the nation by inducing numbness and amnesia. This is particularly evident if one examines *Meeting at the Milestone* by Sigurd Hoel and Knut Hamsun’s *On Overgrown Paths*, two narratives that have played an important role in the economy of national shame.

Meeting at the Milestone was a bestseller for several years after its publication in 1947, and critics acclaimed the novel’s psychological depth and narrative style. Unlike many of his compatriots, who frantically sought to exonerate the majority of Norwegians by scapegoating the overt traitors, Hoel advocated an understanding of national betrayal and war atrocities as the result of poor child-rearing, emotional coldness, irresponsibility and provincial prejudice. In the novel, Hoel shames the Norwegian collective for having failed certain individuals and thus indirectly pushed them into the arms of the Nazi occupation. The narrator-protagonist is a hero of the Norwegian Resistance who chooses anonymity in the novel and goes by the nickname *den plettfrie* (the blameless). The blameless, however, is not without blame. After having impregnated a young woman, he abandoned her and provided neither emotional nor material support to his son. During the war, the son joined the enemy in an attempt to gain self-worth and retribution. Although the blameless admits that it was his personal failure that ultimately made his son a traitor, he feels numb and acknowledges his inability to change. He therefore remains torn between the shame of having fostered a “tool” of Nazism and his public acclaim as a hero in the Norwegian Resistance. Hoel attempts to resolve this schizophrenia at the metanarrative level by shaming the national collective for its role in the war. He also encourages each individual to reassess her personal weaknesses and betrayals of the past in order to build a better future. This process of shaming induces a sense of optimism and underlines the role of individual agency in the process of reconstruction: good Norwegians should start rebuilding Norway by working on themselves. As a result, war is no longer about circumstance and systemic power, but it is conceived as a product of a chain of individual failures that can be corrected.

If Hoel used shame to numb the nation’s wounds and provide incentives for reconstruction, Hamsun’s *On Overgrown Paths* secured Norwegians a posttraumatic shock that put them to shame and induced a complex process of selective amnesia whereby Hamsun the Nazi sympathizer was to be separated from Hamsun the literary genius, with the former to be outcast from national memory. Written during the period Hamsun was awaiting trial for treason, *On Overgrown Paths* is Hamsun’s testament of thoughts, experiences, and memories. Because he stubbornly refused to apologize for his political activities during the war, the Norwegian authorities saw fit to declare the former hero mentally impaired and ruin him economically rather than put him into jail. Annoyed by the authorities’ treatment, Hamsun writes *On Overgrown Paths* in order to prove his sanity to future generations. At the same time, he initiates his own

redemption by explaining his collaboration with Nazi Germany as an act of patriotism. Pointing out the cultural affinity Norway has always had with Germany, Hamsun explains that the reason he supported the Nazis is because he firmly believed that Norway could occupy a prominent position in the new Germanic order. He admits having been wrong for showing support to the Nazi regime. However, he insists that he has always nurtured the deepest feelings for his country. Consequently, *On Overgrown Paths* does not offer an apology. On the contrary, as Hamsun scholars have pointed out, the memoir demonstrates how shrewdly Hamsun continued to assert his political views acting as an individual who assertively decided how to act, write, and create (Sabo 1999, Zagar 2009).

Hamsun's memoir elicits a conflicted emotional response from the reader. On the one hand, the reader feels compassion for Hamsun, an old, deaf, and senile man who was disconnected from the realities of the war and fell victim to his own idealism. On the other hand, the reader cannot help being disgusted and angered by Hamsun's overt collaboration as well as his literary trick to exonerate himself for future generations. Yet, this disgust and anger cannot be upheld and they quickly fall back into compassion. The repeated feedback loops of compassion and anger result into a debilitating shame. In line with those experiencing racial shame and who cannot transform their shame into knowledge, the public opinion in Norway fails to resolve its affective dilemma and is forever caught in the Hamsun case.

Intimately related to Hamsun's problematic collaboration with the Nazis, *On Overgrown Paths* is seldom read as a novel that contributed to unifying the Norwegian nation after WWII. This is because critics focus on what the literary canon proudly includes rather than what it shamefully excludes. Benedict Anderson (1991), however, has successfully demonstrated that nations come into being not only by remembering, but also by excluding and forgetting. Haunting the Norwegian national canon, Hamsun's memoir may have been excluded, but it cannot be forgotten. It lives as embodied knowledge, shaming the nation, entrapping it, and, paradoxically, reproducing it. Shame in this case becomes a way of sticking together, not by exposing the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals, as in the Australian case, but by forever casting the nation into confusion.

The most recent dramatization of this came during the Hamsun jubilee in 2009 when the Norwegian government was criticized by the international Jewish community for financing the ceremonies marking 150 years since Hamsun's birth. International organizations such as Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, and most recently Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, condemned the public funding of the ceremonies as a fabricated and ultimately failed attempt to separate Hamsun's literary work from his sympathies of the Nazi regime.² The Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre insisted that the jubilee was meant to contribute to a nuanced and critical debate on Hamsun, not to celebrate his Nazi sympathies.³ Meeting his Norwegian homologue in Jerusalem in order to discuss the tensed relationship between Norway and Israel following Norway's criticism of the Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, Lieberman used the occasion to remind Støre that Israel could not forgive Norway's celebration of Hamsun. 150 years after his birth Hamsun's problematic past interferes with political talks and once again

² "Ingen Hamsun tilgivelse," The Norwegian News Agency (NTB), 17 January 2010, <http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/nordland/1.6950077>; Lars Erlend Øymo, "Forræderisk av Norge," The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), 9 July 2009, <http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/nordland/1.6688740>.

³ "Ny jødisk kritikk av Hamsun-fest," NTB, 5 August 2009, <http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/nordland/1.6720635>.

forces the Norwegian authorities to take a defensive stand. Internationally, Hamsun's simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility in the Norwegian social imaginary stirs political sensibilities. At home, it continues to precipitate in debilitating shame. This proves that the national structure of shame in Norway is intergenerational, inherited as embodied knowledge from Hamsun's contemporaries, who had to deal with the political failures of their literary genius, to those who witnessed and/or celebrated the Hamsun jubilee in 2009.

Another commentary on shame as intergenerational, chronic and debilitating, this time playing out in the family setting, is Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses*. In the economy of shame, Petterson's novel is particularly interesting as it both draws on the national structure of shame described above and interrupts the numbness and selective amnesia symptomatic of the Norwegian context. Born in 1952, Petterson differs from other Norwegian authors in his generation such as Dag Solstad or Kjartan Fløgstad, who have their roots in the 1970s and 1980s and are explicitly political in their works. What concerns Petterson is the local, the everyday life, and the personal. Published in Norwegian in 2003, *Out Stealing Horses* was later translated into several languages and won Petterson important international prizes such as the prestigious Dublin IMPAC Award in 2007.

The novel's action is structured on two temporal levels: the summer and fall of 1948 and the late fall of 1999. There are also flashbacks to events prior to 1948, such as the marching of German troops into Oslo on April 9, 1940, a dramatic episode in the winter of 1943, and the return of the Norwegian Resistance heroes at end of the war in 1945. The narrator-protagonist, Trond Sander, is a 67-year old widower who, three years after he loses his wife and sister in a car accident, decides to move out of Oslo to live in a remote forest community in Eastern Norway. Accompanied by his dog Lyra and without notifying his two daughters, Trond plunges into the solitary, simple life in the woods where he hopes to cure his loneliness and defy the occasional aches plaguing men his age. In this self-imposed solitude, however, memories of family and several failed relationships begin to haunt him. In particular, Trond recalls his father and the unforgettable summer of 1948 when they spent the vacation together in a forest community close to the Swedish border. Through multiple flashbacks, Trond clarifies that his father had used this place as a cover for his courier activities for the Norwegian Resistance until the winter of 1943, when the Nazis discovered him. Together with another woman collaborator, Trond's father was forced to flee to Sweden to save his life. Once the war was over, he systematically returned to this isolated place, but never accompanied by his family in Oslo. During the summer of 1948, however, the father decided to take his 15-year old son with him.

Trond's admiration for his father increased considerably as father and son bonded in the proximity of nature. A city boy, Trond carefully observed his father and learned from him how to cut down grass with a scythe, log, and bale hay. In his spare time, he roamed forest paths, explored the woods, and tested his own boundaries, often together with his neighbor friend Jon, whose mother, as we later find out, was the woman who had fled with Trond's father in the winter of 1943.

One of the first learning experiences Trond distinctly recalls from the summer of 1948 is when his father asked him to cut the grass behind their cabin. While handling the scythe for the first time proved to be less challenging than expected, Trond was intimidated by this task situated in a thick, tall patch of stinging nettles. In response to the son's hesitation, the father taught his son a lesson the latter would remember for the rest of his life:

'You decide for yourself when it will hurt,' he said, suddenly getting serious. He walked over to the nettles and took hold of the smarting plants with his bare hands and began to pull them up with perfect calm, one after the other, throwing them into a heap, and he did not stop before he had pulled them all up. Nothing in his face indicated that it hurt, and I felt a bit ashamed as I walked along the path after Jon, and I straightened up and caught gait and walked as I normally would, and after only a few steps I could not think why I had not done so at once. (Pettersen 27)

Joining his more experienced companion Jon in a boyish prank to ride the neighbor's horses, Trond plummets from the back of his horse and hurts himself. Momentarily overwhelmed by the pain, young Trond finds inner strength to ignore his bodily aches by recalling his father's words and the nettles which he may have physically avoided, but whose burning needles he nevertheless felt as his father took over and performed the task himself. Trond mobilizes the same burning memory, this time to numb the pain caused by his unsuccessful attempt to "steal horses." Pain here is pushed down into the body to a place from where it cannot reemerge, for what Trond fears is exposure of his lack of ability and knowledge as a city boy, or shame before others. The father's words have an anesthetic effect on the son, and hereafter Trond decides to deploy the same strategy each time he faces a physical and emotional challenge. He uses it throughout adolescence to overcome difficult physical tasks and emotional turmoil caused by his father's decision never to return home to Oslo after the summer of 1948. As an adult, Trond does the same as he struggles in several relationships. In his late sixties, his father's words stay with him when his wife and sister perish in a car accident. Seemingly liberated from all commitments, including his two daughters whom he avoids, Trond moves into a rustic cabin in a remote forest community similar to the one in which he and his father spent the summer of 1948.

His readiness to defy death in solitude and put the past behind is however disturbed, first by the presence of his neighbor, Lars Haug, who coincidentally turns out to be Jon's younger brother, and later on, by his daughter's unexpected visit from Oslo. Lars's tragic story exacerbates the recollection process and haunts Trond's self-assumed tranquility and self-imposed estrangement from his family. A young boy of 10 in 1948, Lars accidentally shot his twin brother dead with Jon's unsecured rifle. Afterwards, the Haug family fell apart: Jon left to sea and the father left his wife and Lars. As years passed, Lars became diligently involved in the farm until one day Jon returned from the sea and claimed the farm through the law of primogeniture. With no property and in disarray, Lars left his home never to see his mother and brother again.

Unlike Lars, whose family lost track of him, Trond walks home from one of his early morning strolls with Lyra only to see his daughter Ellen waiting for him in front of his cabin. After several weeks of detective work, Ellen finally found her father and drove from Oslo to pay him a visit. At first, Trond does not welcome her intrusion, but once Ellen overtly asks whether he would have preferred that she had not come, Trond comes to the sudden realization that she might never return. This perspective strikes him with horror and he spontaneously begs her not to leave. This is a turning point in Trond's life: Ellen's genuine concern for her old father creates an emotional space where Trond can reconcile with his own past and interrupt the numbness and selective amnesia inherited from his own father. Once Ellen leaves for Oslo, the cabin seems empty, the yard is different, and Trond no longer feels obliged to conceive of the past as a foreign country all together. On the contrary, as memory is healing, Trond is ready to recognize the foolishness of his father's advice. Deployed

as a survival strategy by a man in crisis, this slogan sold Trond the illusion that he was in control of his life, that pulling nettles with bare hands does not burn, that numbing pain is the same as healing, that forgetting the past all together is possible, that the ghosts pushed into the darkest corners of memory shall never return. Secretly in love with Jon's mother and unable to confess his adulterous relationship to his wife and children, Trond's father passes on to his son a hard legacy: lacerating pain at being abandoned by a father whom he adored and burning shame that numbs that very pain into emotional sterility. For the first time, Trond is ready to face loss, betrayal, loneliness, torment, guilt, and shame not as personal failures, but as emotional consequences of the war circumstances that first pulled Trond's father and Jon's mother together, and then procured an isolation and emotional sterility in their children.

Critics have compared Petterson's novel with Knut Hamsun's *Pan*. Like the early Hamsun, Petterson is an intensely physical writer that engages his reader with all the senses. Alf Walgermo (2008) points out that *Out Stealing Horses* is a book that the reader does not simply read, but can smell and taste. At the same time, Walgermo also reveals that "... where Hamsun investigates the irrational corners of the mind, Petterson is more attuned with the rational ways of the body." While these comparisons with Hamsun's early works are undoubtedly poignant, I suggest that *Out Stealing Horses* is intimately related to both *Meeting at the Milestone* and *On Overgrown Paths*. All three works deal with events during the war and participate in the economy of national shame in Norway. Like *Meeting at the Milestone*, *Out Stealing Horses* is a reluctant memoir about the relationship between an abandoned son and a heroic father. In Hoel's novel, it is the blameless who narrates the story of how his own emotional coldness and irresponsibility made his son side with the enemy during the war. Although the blameless eventually admits his personal failures to the reader, he cannot come out and instead chooses to rest on the laurel of his participation in the Norwegian Resistance. In *Out Stealing Horses*, the story is told by the son's voice. In contrast to Hoel, who explains wrong political choices by personal psychology, Petterson implies that external circumstances such as the exigencies of war are formative for the father's psychology and which the son inherits. Now a man of age, Trond escapes in the countryside and hopes to live the rest of his life in solitude and stay true to his father's hard legacy: "You decide for yourself when it will hurt." Yet, the ghosts of the past give him no peace and return to haunt him. The chain of emotional sterility is only broken by his daughter's warmth and concern. Just as Trond's father passed on to his son a desperate survival strategy that involved numbed pain and burning shame, so did Hoel fabricate a similar slogan for Norway by implying that it was up to each Norwegian to eradicate the evil by working on themselves. This gave Norwegians the necessary optimism to get over their traumas and start reconstructing their country. Ironically, it also impeded the national community to carefully reassess their ideals and bring shame into public discourse.

More than fifty years after the war, Petterson returns to the ghosts in the system and implies it is time to wear shame differently, not in numbness and amnesia, but in pain and together with others. As Norway strives to maintain its ethical niche in the international arena, this is important both in order to address directly the Hamsun dilemma and, equally important, to recognize the failures of the nation with regard to those children of war for whom, as Bjørn Lengfelder (2010) from the Association of Children of War Lebensborn pointed out, the war is not entirely over.

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