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ROBERT LOWELL'S CULTURALLY CODED LEXIS

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Abstract: **In this paper, I will examine how a vital element of Robert Lowell's descriptive and narrative structures, i.e., the lexis, promise to unfold the "layers" of the culture that served as context for *Life Studies*. This involves exploring both the denotations and connotations of his culturally encoded lexis, that is, the external meanings of certain words and phrases before they "enter" the poem and the internal meanings they acquire after entering the poem. This process of "verbal osmosis", when words absorb meaning from these different contexts, is, what I believe, critic and linguist Winifred Nowottny describes as "give and take between those patterns" (Fowler, 2009: 31). My analysis will focus on the sociolinguistic patina accrued on certain units of Lowell's poetic lexis, such as names of historical people, events and concepts belonging to American and European spiritual cultures and traditions, as well as brand names from popular material culture of the first half of the twentieth century. The analysis will also dwell on the use of idioms, catch phrases and other verbal clichés which reflect the culture that generated them. They function as verbal "ready-mades" that additionally reinforce Lowell's well-known anecdotal, colloquial and informal poetic language. The choice of these particular lexical items is significant as they reflect the categorization of the world and the experience of the poetic voice or the "language user" in broader linguistic terms. At the same time, the categorization of the experience reflects the ideational position, the worldview of the language user. In the context of his poetics of immanence and experience, this culturally coded poetic diction is analyzed as another authentic and documented presentation of immanent narrator's "lived experience".**

Keywords: **Robert Lowell, immanence, lexis, culture, ready-mades, immanence, experience**

This paper analyses how the vital element of Robert Lowell's descriptive and narrative structures, namely his lexis, promise to unfold the "layers" of culture that served as the context for his *Life Studies* (1959). This involves exploring both the denotations and connotations of his culturally encoded lexis, that is, the external meanings of certain words and phrases before they "enter" the poem and their internal meanings acquired after entering the poem. This process of "verbal osmosis" when words absorb meanings from different contexts is what I believe critic and linguist Winifred Nowottny describes as in the following manner:

> [W]hen a word or phrase enters into the patterns set up in a poem its effectiveness will depend much on the give and take between those patterns and itself.

> We cannot, however, avoid the question, 'What does the word or phrase bring with it that is constant enough to make it a contributor to as well as a recipient of the poetic power of the structure it enters?' (Nowottny, 1975:26)

This process of words contributing to and receiving from the "environment" of the poem is the central methodological aspect of this paper. My analysis focuses on the sociolinguistic patina that has accrued on certain units of the poetic lexis, such as the names of historical people, events and concepts of American and European spiritual culture, as well as brand names from the popular material culture, of the first half of the twentieth century. The analysis will also dwell on the use of idioms, catch phrases and other verbal clichés which reflect the culture that generated them, for they function as verbal "ready-mades" in addition to reinforcing Lowell's well-known anecdotal, colloquial and informal poetic language. The choice of these particular lexical items is significant to my analysis as they reflect the categorization of the world and the experience performed by the poetic voice or the "language user" in a broader linguistic context. At the same time, categorization of experience reflects the ideational position, the worldview, of the language user. As the linguist and critic Roger Fowler explains, commenting on M.A.K Holliday's theory:

> Through the ideational function, says Halliday, 'the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world'—through it he represents his view of the real world' (his system of categorization) to himself and to others. The speaker's view of the world, of how it is structured and divided into systems of separate 'things' and 'processes', is obviously carried largely by vocabulary: the way 'things' are named and classified. . . . (Fowler, 2009: 31)

At the same time, if the main aim of this poetry is to catch the "flux of experience", as Lowell often declared in his interviews, it becomes important to examine the culture which constitutes this flux. Consequently, *Life Studies* is a poetry collection that cannot be read without consulting encyclopaedias or other reference books, regardless of one's general knowledge of the American culture of said period. This is the case because some of Lowell's references to popular and the material culture are either short-lived or belong to very specialized registers. Perloff's personal account of the impact Lowell's poetic voice had on her, speaks about how much his poetry is saturated in the American culture of the 1950s:

> Who can forget the shock waves generated by these lines, appearing in a slim book called *Life Studies* in 1959? For me, the memory is very much alive: 1959 was the year my second daughter was born and I was having a hard time of it. Two children under the age of three, very little help, a physician husband who was rarely home, endless Gerber meals to serve, piles of baby clothes to take down to the building's laundry room, and—perhaps worst of all—the conversations with Other Mothers in the playground that revolved around things like the parsley sale at the Giant supermarket. I never seemed to get enough sleep and on rare occasions I even took one of the then-new tranquillizers like Equanil, whose trade name was Miltown. Thus, in the rare moments snatched for "serious" reading, it seemed amazing to come across a poem so "authentically" depicting the poet and his wife, not as lovers but as a sedated pair, lying, not

> even on their own bed but, incongruously, on "mother's"—a bed where the only Dionysian "abandon" is that of the gilded bedposts. What a fitting emblem of what the neighbouring poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," called "the tranquillized Fifties"! (Perloff, "The Return of Robert Lowell": 1-2)

The documentary-like diction of Lowell's poems can also be read as the language of the immanent poetic voice, documenting and thereby providing the authenticity of a "lived experience" in the context of the poetics of immanence and experience. Therefore, this concrete and culturally-encoded lexis is tightly interwoven with, and consequently supports, the structure of the poetic model of immanence and experience. The analysis of this specific diction does not require as much in-depth scrutiny as it requires a broad grasp of the widening cultural gyres of the indicated period. One can get an idea of this culturally coded vocabulary by reading Lowell's prose and his interviews in which, for example, he refers to Snodgrass' daughter: "I mean, the poems are about his child, his divorce, and Iowa City, and his child is a Dr. Spock child" (Bidart, 2003: 245). Dr. Spock is a rather obscure reference to a specific era that requires particular knowledge to understand. The chances are the majority of twenty-first century readers will need a reference book to find out about this public figure in order to understand the connotations of his name (which accidently coincides with "Mr. Spock", the popular hero of the 1960s-1970s TV series and the films from the "Star Trek" series). The connotations refer to a child brought up as an individual from a very early age, one who has been shown love and affection freely and openly. Dr. Spock's popular and radical ideas about child-bearing fitted well into the liberal decade of the 1960s.

This referential quality of the concrete, descriptive and narrative language of *Life Studies* is interpreted by critics as a result of Lowell's (and other poets') mid-century quest for an authentic voice or manner of speech. Perloff comments on this general trend in *Radical Artifice* (1991:41):

> [Louis] Simpson's view of the poet as sensitive other, giving voice to the "primacy of feeling", carries on what I have called the holding operation of the fifties and sixties, the poetic demand, if no longer for common speech, at least for authentic speech. To be a poet, at midcentury, was to "find one's own voice," to "bring to speech," as Denise Levertov put it, one's own experience. "Almost the whole problem of writing poetry," said Robert Lowell in 1961, "is to bring it back to what you really find."

Perloff contends that the impact of media on language from the 1950s onwards made "demands on the authentic self . . . extremely difficult to sustain even for a poet like Lowell" (1991:42). Therefore, she maintains, that American poetry had to take a turn towards the "radical artifice" which led to Language poetry and other more radical strands after the mid-century.

This culturally encoded quality of Lowell's poetic language is often analysed by critics as being in service to the content-related issues of his poetry, which include his manic depression, his psychiatric treatment in hospitals, stories about his family members and the American history connected to his family history. However, I believe that the culturally informed discourse of *Life Studies* calls for a stylistic and socio-cultural approach, since, as Fowler again argues, "discourse has a

definite context of culture, which may—I would say "ought to"—be studied as an influence on the linguistic structure of literary texts, and as a guide to their interpretation" (2009:114).

The third section of the long poem "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow", which depicts Great Aunt Sarah playing her dummy piano, also, includes the image: "Aunt Sarah, risen like the phoenix / from her bed of troublesome snacks and *Tauchnitz classics*" (my emphasis). These lines reveal more of her general portrait, foregrounding the objects of her personal use: the bed, the snacks and the type of books, called "Tauchnitz". I've already identified Lowell's technique of metonymic displacement which reveals and marks the personality, lifestyle and ideology of the agents in a poetic experience, which Lawrence Kramer refers to as a "rhetorical commitment to the figure of metonymy, a trope that is equivalent to displacement in psychoanalytic discourse" (Kramer, 1986: 85). Through the objects so described we can construct the psychological profile of a withdrawn and, perhaps, depressed woman, who spends most of her time in bed. When she is not in bed, she is described as "risen like the phoenix", that is, somebody restored back to life after death. She takes her solace in "snacks" which are "troublesome" and in German books, "Tauchnitz classics". It therefore becomes obvious that the "troublesome snacks" and "the books" become metonymic displacements of Aunt Sarah's personality and lifestyle. It consequently becomes necessary to ask what kind of books "Tauchnitz classics" were and signified in the culture of the time. Are they a socio-cultural semiotic sign which speaks for a certain class and attendant set of values and mentalities? In other words, one needs to determine the external connotations which the proper name "Tauchnitz" brings to the semantic and semiotic patterns of the poem. In the language of semiotics, these external connotations can be categorized as the "third order of signification" of the denotative sign which reflects the concepts and ideology of the particular culture:

> In the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major culturally-variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview—such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness and so on. (Chandler,1994:95)

These new meanings and connotations are ascribed to the sign as signifiers in the coded system of the particular language and culture. *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* records give the name of a famous German family of printers and publishers, "Tauchnitz", which began to publish British and American classics for the tastes and requirements of Anglophone travellers in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. These editions, considered precursors to the popular paperbacks of the twentieth century, were often smuggled to the UK and US as forbidden imports. But what does all this say about Great Aunt Sarah? We can conclude that she lives in the past more than the present, since she is surrounded by objects that function as markers of the previous century, probably the century of her youth. However, besides generating this brief socio-cultural sketch of her character, the single phrase "Tauchnitz classics" also adds authenticity to the scene in terms of unity of time, place and culture. The name "Tauchnitz" semantically grows into a larger concept which imports its connotations into the language of the poem. Its connotations enrich the poetic

language with cultural expansiveness and are combined with the lyrical condensation of a single phrase. The signifieds of the concept illustrate Bakhtin's idea that there are no socio-culturally neutral words in language. Even a personal name such as "Baron Christian Bernhard von Tauchnitz (1816-95)", who founded the publishing house in Leipzig in 1837 that began to issue a series of English-language titles in 1841 that eventually became known as the 'Collection of British and American Authors'", becomes a socio-cultural concept and a signifier of particular temporal and spatial meanings. At the same time, the objects in the scene of Aunt Sarah adhere to the typical, mid-century demand for cultural authenticity, as well as providing the socio-cultural categories which are attributable to her as a person. Perloff attributes this feature to Lowell, as well as his contemporaries John Berryman and Louis Simpson, amongst few others.

The same era that Aunt Sarah's "books" evoke is also referred to by the historical term "AncienRėgimė" in lines (7) and (8) of the second stanza of the same poem: "Even at noon here the formidable / *AncienRégimė* still keeps nature at a distance". Historically, "AncienRėgimė" is a French phrase which means an "old order" and an "old regime". It refers to the socio-political system and aristocratic culture of France from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century prior to the French Revolution. This generic phrase covers a huge time span and "carries" a huge semantic weight of French and European history, the ideology of the aristocratic classes, and the names of historians such as Alexis De Tocqueville, who researched and wrote about this period. In other words, it functions as a full semiotic sign encoded with the numerous connotations which the phrase brings "inside" the narrow context of the poem. This complex sign that enters the poem with its signifieds also gains new meanings through the implied verbal osmosis. "Ancient Regime" therefore stands for the aristocratic culture of the pre-WWII Bostonian ways of life and powerful, financial status. By choosing such culturally encoded items in the lexis, Lowell empowers *Life Studies* with the quality of the cultural "epos" of the pre-war period. This diction, which belongs to the domain of American material and popular culture from the 1950s, also makes *Life Studies* a culturally colourful text. An example of this kind of reference appears in the poem "Grandparents" with the name "Pierce-Arrow", an expensive, luxurious car manufacturer and self-titled model of the 1930s:

> They're altogether otherworldly now,
> those adults champing for their ritual Friday spin
>
> to pharmacist and five-and-ten in Brockton.
> Back in my throw-away and shaggy span
> of adolescence, Grandpa still waves his stick
>
> like a policeman;
> Grandmother, like a Mohammedan, still wears
> herthick
> lavender mourning and touring veil;
> the Pierce Arrow clears its throat in a horse-stall.
> Then the day road dust rises to whiten
> the fatigued elm leaves
> the nineteenth century, tired of its children, is
> gone.
> They're all gone into a world of light; the farm's
> myown. (Lowell, 1964: 68)

In an initial reading, this descriptive and even metaphorical name suggests the name of a horse, since "a horse-stall" is mentioned in the same line. It becomes

clear later, however, that the reference is to a car in the context created by the first few lines of the poem: "those adults champing for their ritual Friday spin". The informal use of "spin", meaning "a short drive", and the grandparents "champing for" it, another informal use of the verb "to champ", reiterates the informal idiom "to champ at the bit" (*Merriam Webster*), meaning to be impatient to start working or taking a journey. The use of this concrete name which belongs to the register of the American automobile industry can be interpreted as a further example of Lowell's concrete and documentary diction, generating his well-known "authentic speech". However, if we consider the last two lines of the stanza, it becomes evident that it is more than that. The grandparents are dead and gone and with them the pre-war values and culture. Similarly, the "Pierce-Arrow" company, active between 1901 and 1938, the year Lowell's grandfather died, is also gone. The name of the car in the context of the poem becomes a sign, another marker of the pre-World War II era and culture, as "Pierce Arrow" is ascribed a new signifier in the poem—the personal history of the family. In other words, this expensive and luxurious car becomes the symbol of the bygone, comfortable ways of life of an aristocratic family.

Lowell's "culture studies" do not end here, however. The poem "Sailing Home from Rapallo" (Lowell,1964: 77) reflects the narrator's changing emotions toward his deceased mother. We hear his grief in the third line, "and tears ran down my cheeks", before his irony and sarcasm towards Mother's snobbery and exaggerated class consciousness become evident in the following line: "mother travelled first-class in the hold / her Risorgimento black and gold casket / was like Napoleon's at the Invalides". However, his emotional descent reaches the furthest limit when he informs us of the tragicomic misspelling of her last name:

> In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,
> *Lowell* had been misspelled *LOVEL*.
> The corpse
> was wrapped like *panetone*in Italian tinfoil.
> (Lowell, 1964:78)

These most bitter feelings regarding the sheer absurdity of human fate and his most cynical and grotesque lines come at the very end. The reference is to the traditional Italian sweet bread-loaf shaped like a cupola that is enjoyed at Christmas—*panetone*. The dehumanizing description of Mother's body with a word from the food register is a tragicomic treatment of her pretentious taste and exaggerated adoration of Italian culture; she even dies in Rapallo. This sentiment is echoed throughout *Life Studies*.

Similarly, the next poem in the collection, "During Fever", depicts his Mother's tendency to aspire to the "right" circles and adopt the "right", that is, high class ideologies and tastes:

> You had a window-seat,
> an electric blanket,
> a silver hot water bottle
> monogrammed like a hip-flask,
> Italian china fruity
> with bunches and berries
> and proper *putti.* (Lowell, 1964: 80)

Through the lexis of the popular material culture in the above stanza and in the last lines of the previous poem, we can discern his Mother's socio-cultural position and attitudes. Part of her ideology is to trust Ital-

ian culture unconditionally as a sign of sophistication and social status. This is clearly explicated in the prose memoir "91 Revere Street", which is part of *Life Studies*. In this stanza, the Italian word "*putti*" denotes the figure of a Cupid-like baby from Renaissance and Baroque paintings found as patterns of common china and objects for practical use. However, the narrator's ironic overtone is caught in the pre-modifying adjective "proper" ("proper *putti*") in which we hear the echo of his Mother's voice. By using this word, the narrator enters into a kind of dialogue with his dead mother, which reiterates at the same time Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic and polyphonic character of language.

The analysis of the "external" connotations is simultaneously an analysis of the multi-layered discourse of Lowell's poetry. The text turns into a palimpsest. This multi-layered discourse is also produced by the use of the lexical "ready-mades", or what stylistics refers to as "generics". According to Fowler, they "are generalized propositions which claim universal truth, and are usually cast in syntax reminiscent of proverbs or scientific laws" (2009:167). The "generics" in Lowell's *Life Studies* most often appear as idioms or component parts of larger idioms, clichés and catchphrases.

Ideologically, they are a highly encoded lexis shared by many people, and consequently, they reflect the ideology and culture of a large population. These are just some examples of idiomatic phrases: "Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge" from "Beyond the Alps"; "they blew their tops and beat him black and blue" from "Memories of West Street and Lepke"; "heart in mouth" from "Man and Wife". These are each examples of idioms being used in their original meaning but in the contexts of the poems they operate more as contributors than recipients of these contexts. In other words, they retain their external meanings codified by the system of American English language and culture. Besides adding authenticity and anecdotal quality to Lowell's language, they release a sociolinguistic polyphony of voices from the culture that generated them. The lines are primarily only allusive and reminiscent of well-known idioms which appear paraphrased or deeply embedded and almost blended into the syntax of the poem. It is equally important, as the critic Paul Simpson says, that idioms are essentially metaphoric expressions:

> [M]any metaphors have become embedded over time into fixed expressions like idioms. Idioms are conventionally defined as clusters of words whose meaning cannot be read off their constituent parts, although it is important not to lose sight of the often metaphorical origin of a particular idiom. (Simpson, 2004:93)

They carry their "external", "ready-made" metaphoric meanings into the structure of the poem which are then altered, paraphrased and blended into the context of the poem. Consider this example of a paraphrased idiom from "Beyond the Alps:"

> The lights of science couldn't hold a candle
> to Mary risen – at one miraculous stroke
> (Lowell, 1964: 3)

It is evident that the idiom "could not hold a candle" is highly incorporated into the syntax of the poem as the predicate to the grammatical subject "the lights of science", which is another metaphorical expression. As a weak metaphor for knowledge and intellectual enlightenment, "the lights of science" suggests the failure of science to provide answers to the spiritual and existential requirements of the people of the twentieth

century. That is why science "could not hold a candle" up to "Mary risen–at one miraculous stroke", or measure up to Christianity. The "candle", considered an inferior means of "illumination" in regards of technological progress, becomes superior to "the lights of science" and a metaphor for religious enlightenment that attracts "the crowds at San Pietro [who] screamed Papa" (Lowell, 1964: 4). The idiom and metaphorical expression of this line gain additional symbolic meanings through their verbal interactions. However, their externally contributed meanings are still relatively stable in the patterns of the poem. As such, they add to the idiomatic quality and authenticity of Lowell's language, which remains sensitive to the culture that serves as the context of the poem.

Another case of two idioms incorporated into the linguistic structure of a poem to the extent that they produce new metaphors which stand for weakness, unrealistic expectations and emotional alienation, are the well-known lines of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (my italics):

> That's how I *threw cold water*
> on my Mother and Father's
> *watery martini pipe dreams* at Sunday dinner.
> (Lowell, 1964: 59)

The syncretism and general sensation of weakening or "diluting" the power, authority and love towards the parents are captured by the first idiomatic phrase "cold water" which is "thrown" at the second idiomatic phrase, "pipe dreams", which denotes something weak and unrealistic as wishful thinking. These lines are a rare example of grammatical, stylistic and metaphorical "games" the child-adult narrator plays. The generics, that is, the idioms and idiomatic phrases in these lines, are thoroughly absorbed into the texture of the poem as one phrase serves as an adjective to the other phrase. Paul Simpson gives an interesting example of this idiom blending, similar to the processes operating in Lowell's idiomatic language:

> (1) He's burning the midnight oil at both ends.
> (from Simpson 1992b)

In this example, two expressions embodying one conceptual metaphor have been unwittingly merged. The metaphor which is evoked is ENERGY IS A BURNING FUEL and it is commonly transmitted through idioms like 'burn the midnight oil' and 'burning the candle at both ends'. The popular term for this sort of slip, a 'mixed metaphor', is something of a misnomer because, as observed, this is really a blend of two idioms which draw on the same metaphor. (Simpson, 2004: 93)

The first stanza of the poem "The Banker's Daughter" is a further example of the assimilation of popular idioms into the language of the poem. On this occasion, the idiom "to lay an egg", is only implied and echoed in the poem:

> Once this poor country egg from Florence lay
> at her accouchement, such a virtuous ton
> of woman only women thought her one.
> King Henry pirouetted on his heel
> and jested, "Look, my cow's producing veal."
> (Lowell, 1964: 5)

The stanza resonates with several meanings of the idiom "to lay an egg"—to do something badly and to give birth—in the context of the historical story of Marie de Medici as a second wife to Henry IV of France that was unsuccessful as a Queen consort and a Queen

regent to her son Louis XIII, who subsequently banished her from France. Thus, through the informal use of "egg" meaning "a human being", this "poor country egg" is someone who did poorly in her life, and someone who gave birth. The idiom is echoed by the verbal interplay between the past tense of the verb "lie" as in "lay at her accouchement", and the homophonous present tense of "lay", as in "lay an egg". She "lay on her accouchement" in labour to "lay an egg"—give birth to a son who will be an executioner of her fate. The image of Marie de Medici in labour and her husband "jesting" about her weight is rendered in realistic and straightforward lines. Thus, the symbolic and metaphoric meanings are produced within this realistically rendered scene by the external idiomatic connotations of the word "egg" and the idiom "to lay an egg".

"Home after Three Months Away" is one of many poems in *Life Studies* which use catchy pop-phrases and quotes. The well-known phrase in this poem, "spin and toil", is from the Gospel of Luke: "Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not (*The Official King James Bible Online* 12:27). This slightly paraphrased quote appears in the first line of the second stanza (my italics):

> Recuperating, I neither *spin nor toil*.
> Three stories down below,
> achoreman tends our coffin's length of soil,
> and seven horizontal tulips blow.
> Just twelve months ago,
> these flowers were pedigreed
> imported Dutchmen; now no one need
> distinguish them from weed.
> blushed by the late spring snow,
> they cannot meet
> another year's snowballing enervation.
> I keep no rank nor station.
> Cured, I am *frizzled,* stale and small.
> (Lowell, 1964: 84)

This is an example of a quote whose full ideational connotation, that is, its full external meaning does not "enter" the poem with its full connotations. There is only an echo of the recommendation from the original context that men should not worry about material things but remain concerned with spiritual matters. This is "heard" in its reference to plants, "the tulips", and the narrator's self-perception as "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small". The physical resemblance of "frizzled" and withered in dying plants causes an association with the "lilies" which "do not labor or spin" like him. The reference to plants is incorporated in his self-image as a dying annual plant, like the Dutch tulips in his "coffin's length" front garden. The dehumanizing state caused by his illness is like the "snowballing enervation" which the "tulips" cannot survive. Thus, the independent "generic" phrase, "spin and toil", exceeds the original Biblical connotation and "lives" in the culture as a free signifier, a catchy phrase solely reminiscent of its original idea, its original signified. As such, when removed from its original context, it can enter into other spheres and contexts freely and acquire new signifieds, as it does in this poem. Its external meanings are only implied and absorbed in the language. In Nowottny's terms, this phrase is not stable in the patterns of the poem and is more a recipient than a contributor (1975:26). However, as in the other examples, it reflects the immanent narrator's ideational position and his manner of categorizing his experience as a language user.

The emphasis in this paper is on Lowell's masterfully condensed, descriptive lines whose lexis has the

potential to convey rich connotations to revealing a broad cultural spectrum and ideology. The lexis has been analysed to show how the external connotations, the names of historical people, objects of material culture and idiomatic expressions as verbal "ready-mades", expand the grasp of culture in the poems and contribute to the authenticity of the immanent narrator. Equally, the assimilative processes of the poetic language toward the external connotations have been shown to produce new, and primarily, metaphoric meanings. In the context of the poetics of immanence and experience, Lowell's culturally coded poetic diction has been analysed as another authentic and documented presentation of the immanent narrator's "lived experience".

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