

A Welcome Intrusion: Five Books by Zoran Živković

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High fantasy, particularly in its swords-and-lords mode, is of little interest to those more interested in adventurous fiction than fiction about adventures. The covers of these brick-like tomes—sword-wielding muscle man, dragon, maiden in diaphanous dress—tend to reflect the contents all too accurately. There is, however, another category, broader and richer, that is sometimes called *fantastika*.¹ Practitioners of it, artists like Kafka, Borges, and Calvino, give us stories, often short, that might be called modernist myths. Zoran Živković is of their number.

Stories in the *fantastika* tradition often begin with an intrusion, apparently innocuous, into a quiet life, and the tales which describe these intrusions are themselves intrusions into the lives of those who read them, intrusions that may amuse us for an afternoon, make us angry, sad, bored, happy, or—this happens all the time to those sensitive to literature—remind us that what we know is partial, if not wrong.

Intrusions take many shapes. A package might plunk unexpectedly into the mailbox, a parcel containing five books, bound in a uniform black, produced by an unknown writer whose name—Zoran Živković—one can't pronounce. (The marks floating above the *z* and *c* in the surname only add to the mystery.) An intrusion such as this one, five books exploding into one's home and consciousness, might impose a task: not to struggle with those books for anything as reductive as comprehension, but rather to seek the critical appreciation that can come only from viewing objects from angles and perspectives of sufficient variety.

The intrusion will insinuate itself on many fronts: the mysterious name, Zoran Živković, for example, a name never seen before peeling back the paper on the parcel containing the five black books, suddenly appears in an august business newspaper. In an essay in the salmon-pink pages of the August 7, 2010 *Financial Times*, James Lovegrove writes about four novels, and one of them—not one of the five that intruded—is by the mysterious Živković. From Lovegrove's piece we glean certain biographical details, details to be confirmed and augmented on-line, about the author who has occupied our consciousness. These details are an angle, a place to begin.

1 For a discussion of *fantastika*, see: Clute, John. "John Clute: Fantastika." *Locus Online*. Available from <http://www.locusmag.com/Perspectives/2009/09/john-clute-fantastika.html>. Internet; accessed 18 August 2010.

Who is Zoran Živković?

He is, Lovegrove tells us, a Serb, and has “impeccable SF credentials”: he is the compiler of a science fiction encyclopedia, a fan of Arthur C. Clarke, and the former presenter of a TV show about science fiction movies.² He was awarded a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, and has worked as a publisher and an editor. His professional history suggests that books have been at the center of his life, but he came to writing fiction late: “I wrote my first piece of prose,” he admits, “only when I was 45.”³ He is married and lives, with his wife and twin sons, in Belgrade.⁴

All of this information may come as a surprise to readers of the five books—none of them science fiction—that have entered home and mind (*The Library* [2002], *Compartments* [2004], *Four Stories Till the End* [2004], *Miss Tamara, the Reader* [2006], and *Amarcord* [2007]), or anyway to readers of these five volumes who believe that an author’s fiction should, if it doesn’t actually recast the author’s time, place, and experience, be easily traceable to them.

There is, of course, a strand of modernism closely linked to place and authors’ experience of it. Think, for example, of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, or Bely’s *Petersburg*, works that are dependent (though not in any simple way) on the authors’ experiences of their cities. Živković, on the other hand, if the five intrusive novels are any indication, should be shelved with authors whose works take place in locations that, though they may be vaguely European, are not specific European places, and are, therefore, not disfigured by local politics. Slobodan Milošević, for example, does not appear even once in these five books by the Serbian author, and though the Chinese embassy that NATO flattened in 1999 was just across the street from Živković’s Belgrade home,⁵ aerial bombardment does not figure in Živković’s fiction. “I have done my very best to forget that awful experience,” he explains.⁶

What we have, therefore, in the five black books, is fantastic fiction that foregoes the ephemeral in favor of what Živković calls “the only two themes in the noble art of fiction writing: love and death.”⁷ Generally, when writers proudly insist that they only write about grandiose themes and refer to their craft as a “noble art,” one can safely guess that the work will be turgid. (Contrast this allegiance to grand themes and nobility with the attitude of filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, one of the great artists of the last century. He explained his

2 Lovegrove, James. “Alien Nations.” *The Financial Times*. 07 08 2010, 14.

3 “EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: Zoran Živković.” *SF SIGNAL*. Available from <http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2009/11/exclusive-interview-zoran-zivkovic/>. Internet; accessed 10 August 2010.

4 Lundberg, Jason Erik. “Zoran Živković.” *Strange Horizons*. Available from <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2004/20040906/zivkovic-a.shtml#>. Internet; accessed 10 August 2010.

5 Lundberg, “Zoran Živković.”

6 Lundberg, “Zoran Živković.”

7 Lundberg, “Zoran Živković.”

artistic aim thus: “I just want to make a tray of good tofu.”⁸) The only exceptions to the grandiosity-equals-banality rule occur when writers are willing to treat even grand themes with humor. Živković understands this: “Even the most profound search for meaning fails,” he says, “if [it is] not spiced with some humorous touch that softens it,” though he adds that “the laugh needs the presence of the seriousness to be truly effective.”⁹

“Who is Zoran Živković?” is the title of the section of the essay you are now reading. The previous paragraph is devoted not to who the Serbian encyclopedist, editor, publisher, and father of twins is, but rather to the work that this shadowy figure has done, and for those of us who have never shaken his hand, kicked a soccer ball around with him, or engaged him in a game of *yamb*,¹⁰ the work is all we can know of Zoran Živković. His work is the intrusion that matters.

What Does Zoran Živković do?

There is nothing duller than the sort of “surrealist” writer whose work is just one bizarre notion stacked on top of another in the hope that the stack will draw from the reader a stunned shake of the head. Živković has plenty of ideas that are odd enough to leave readers shaking their heads, but rather than simply trying to top one bizarre notion with another, he uses his nimble imagination not only to dream up surprising ideas, but also to create rigorously designed forms in which to present them. His happiest results come from what he calls “story-suites,”¹¹ collections of stories which, rather than being composed of discrete units (one bizarre bit teetering atop another bizarre bit to which it is connected only by proximity), are linked in a variety of ways, some of which will only become apparent upon turning the last page, or maybe, having reread the collection, upon turning that last page a second time, or perhaps upon returning, a third time, to the first page. In *The Library* the link Živković forges between his tales is simple: each of the stories has something to do with a library, and as the word “library” occurs in the title of each story, only the dimmest reader will miss this.

Libraries, at least in the ideal, are hermetic spaces, removed from the hurly-burly of the world (and, until recently, this included the on-line world). They are places for quiet reading, focused study, for the gleaning of facts useful and useless from texts. One disrupts the calm of the ideal library only at the risk of a harsh—albeit whispered—rebuke from a stern librarian. We don’t, however, live in an ideal world, or read in an ideal library. There are intrusions: the patron who doesn’t have an indoor voice, the homeless fellow and the miasma that accompanies him as he chats with his invisible friend. The hermetic bubble the

8 Rayns, Tony. “Ozu Yasujiro, Tofu Maker.” *Sight & Sound* February (2010), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49594/>. (accessed August 13, 2010).

9 Lundberg, “Zoran Živković.”

10 *Yamb* is a dice game popular in Serbia.

11 Lundberg, “Zoran Živković.”

library would ideally provide is burst. In just the same way, the five black books, in their unsolicited parcel, invade a reader's library, a reader's life, and these intrusive tomes are filled with stories, many of which begin with intrusions into lives: an unsolicited email arriving on a writer's computer; a book, and then books, and then more books appearing in a man's mailbox; a book a man didn't buy, a book that is more than one book, insinuating itself into the man's bag; an unbecoming paperback disfiguring the collection on a rigorously curated shelf. In many of these stories a book intrudes into a life; in others it is people, Živković's protagonists, who, like the bellowing fellow and the pungent character, intrude into libraries. One of these characters, having been locked in at the close of business, finds himself in a "night library"; another ends up in a biblio-hell.

Let us examine the latter. The only thing we know for certain about Živković is that he makes books; this, along with hints throughout the five black books suggests that he is a reader. Thus one enjoys the playfulness with which, in "Infernal Library," this apparent reader and lover of books imagines what hell might be like for one who—like so many of his and our contemporaries—is not a reader.

The first indication that this non-reader's hell is not the hell Judeo-Christian mythology has taught us to fear comes when the warder who inducts the sinner into the underworld informs him, over the course of his initial processing, that hell is no longer referred to as "hell," that "punishment" is now called "therapy," and that: "Every age has its own hell. Today it's a library" (p. 60).¹² In the warder's explanation for hell's metamorphosis we see the humor with which Živković lightens his weighty themes, and also begin to perceive the shape this neo-hell will take:

...the trait that linked by far the greatest number of our inmates, 84.12 percent to be precise, was their aversion to reading. This was understandable for 26.38 percent, since they are completely illiterate. But what about the 47.71 percent who, although literate, had never picked up a single book, as though fearing the plague? The remaining ten or so percent read something here and there, but they'd wasted their time since it was totally worthless. (p. 61)

It is, of course, in the precision that the humor lies, and the warder's fastidiousness extends to how much—how little—the newly damned has read: "In the past twenty-eight years of your life you started two books. You got halfway through the fourth page of the first, and in the second you didn't get beyond the introductory paragraph" (p. 62). The newly-damned non-reader's excuse—"It didn't catch my interest" (p. 62)—cuts no mustard.

Since the changing times—hell is no longer hell, punishment is therapy—dictate that hell (or whatever it's now called) may no longer model itself on a medieval torture chamber,

12 Živković, Zoran. *The Library*. Translated by Alice Copple-Tošić. Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2010. All quotations from *The Library* will be taken from this edition and will be noted in the text.

but rather must take its inspiration from modern jails which, the warder believes, “have almost been turned into recreation centers ... [or] modest hotels” (p. 63), it has been decided that rather than boiling in oil, or roasting in eternal fire, inmates will be compelled to read.

“So that’s my punishment?” the new inmate asks. “Reading?”

“Therapy,” the warder replies (p. 65), but the therapy is harsh. The inmate, a fellow who has lived a life evil enough that he has ended up in what used to be hell, is damned to read pastoral literature, idylls, and to do so for all of eternity rather than the detective stories he might (barely) have found more palatable.

As noted earlier, it is clear that Živković is a reader. Who but a bibliomaniac could write so convincingly of the moral rectitude of what is, for most, merely an entertainment or education option?:

It was a simple matter. We made reading compulsory for everyone. This enabled us to combine the beautiful with the useful. First of all, our inmates could get rid of the main shortcoming that brought them here. If they had read more, they would have had less time and motive for misdeeds. Reading for them is truly healing. That is why we consider it therapy, not punishment, even though it might be a little late. But it is never really too late for something like that. (p. 64)

Živković is, we see, writing a moral tale, but his humor prevents him from ever turning preachy. Humor, though, is only one bulwark against dull piety.

How does Živković write?

Exuberant use of exuberant language might have been another defense against creeping sanctimoniousness, but this is an avenue down which Živković does not travel. Like most of the preeminent practitioners of *fantastika*, Živković understands that language as unadorned and stripped down as possible provides a better vehicle for his outrageous imaginings than would a more baroque style. When readers are confronted with, to offer just a few examples: a world where memories are bought, sold, and consulted like reference books; an on-line profile of a writer that includes books he has not yet written, years he has not yet lived; a string of compartments on a train each containing, for our protagonist, an impossible encounter; eyeglasses which erase text, vowel by vowel, consonant by consonant, from the books they are used to read, and ...one could go on—Živković’s imagination is fertile—the quietness of the language keeps the fancy, which, at times, *is* baroque, from cloying. Writers who write about the fantastic do well to write about it, like Živković, in language that is as neutral as they can manage.

One can find examples of such writing in each of the stories in these five black books, but to illustrate the point we might as well extract some examples from the other story previously mentioned, “Night Library.” In this story a man is locked into a library at

night, and learns that, after the usual closing time, the library changes from a collection of more or less ordinary books into a collection of dossiers called “books of life” (p. 42), dossiers that are only bound upon the deaths of their subjects, because only when lives are over are books of life finished.

The situation is, make no mistake, fantastic, and therefore Živković’s language is appropriately flat. “Night Library” begins, for example, “I shouldn’t have gone to the movie first. If I’d known it would last almost two hours, I’d have gone to the library beforehand” (p. 33). Of course at that point in the story the protagonist does not know what he has got himself into, so perhaps there’s no call for overheated language, but even later, when the night librarian tells him exactly what the books of life are, the language remains mundane. Describing them, the librarian says:

...they are very objective diaries. That is their main attraction. Nothing is left out, nothing is hidden, nothing is shown in a different way. They are perfectly true. Which is only fitting. Like documentary films. You’ll see for yourself when you read one of the books of life. Which one would you like? (p. 44)

The language is flat, and remains so even when the protagonist, upon reading his own dossier comes to believe that the night library is “some kind of secret police, spying service” (p. 48). He gets angry, but his anger is the mundane sort of anger all of us feel at the non-fantastic upsets that are a part of any life. This preference for transparent style is present throughout Živković’s work and accounts, to a significant extent, for its success.

In fact, the simple style of the stories in *The Library* bears most of the burden of keeping Živković’s stories from descending, on the one hand, into facile surrealism, and, on the other hand, into sanctimonious moralizing. This is so especially in *The Library* because Živković’s second key defense, the rigorousness with which his story-suites are constructed, is less evolved in this collection than in other works: in *The Library* the only link between the tales is that they have something to do with libraries, and have titles that include the word “library.” In other collections the links between sections and stories are more complex, and thus more satisfying.

Compartments, the novella that features in the collection of that name¹³ (it is joined by four additional stories), is not, by definition, a story-suite, but it is structured exactly as if it were one. That is, the action of the novella consists of a protagonist going from one train compartment to another, with interludes between each compartment, and as in the story-suites, there are commonalities of language, event, and theme, linking each compartment—each section—of the story. The protagonist’s experience of the train and its compartments

13 Živković, Zoran. *Compartments*. Translated by Alice Copple-Tošić. Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2010. All quotations from *Compartments* will be taken from this edition and will be noted in the text.

is parallel to a reader's experience of a book and its stories.

The conductor—think of him as the writer who stands to one side of the stories he has created—takes charge from the beginning, and lays down arbitrary rules for the protagonist to follow. He starts by insisting that the protagonist wear “slippers with large pink pom-poms” (p. 3). When the protagonist is properly attired, the conductor suffers a breakdown, a weakness that stems, it seems, from having, when helping her don her pom-pommed slippers, become smitten with a previous passenger's foot, so much so that he kissed it, an act which has left him with turbulent feelings of guilt and desire. Having heard from the conductor the significance of the woman and her foot, our protagonist is ready to commence reading, or rather, to commence traveling down the train, from one story, one compartment, to the next.

The first compartment into which the protagonist intrudes, and what he finds there, is analogous to each of the five compartments that will follow it. There is a situation, outlandish and inexplicable, that the protagonist responds to without undue surprise. In this case he sees a woman dressed in black and a man knitting a bright yellow scarf. The woman explains: “I'm in mourning for my late husband. There he is, over there”(p. 11). She indicates the knitter. We learn that, as far as the woman is concerned, her husband died to her the day he did not respond appropriately to a woman who intruded into their compartment, a woman who we already suspect is identical with the one whose foot so excited the conductor, a woman we will come to think of this woman as “she.” This woman, we learn invaded their compartment and—readers easily shocked will want to skip over this part—ate an apple.

And if you'd only seen how lustfully he looked at her as she bit into the apple! As I'm sure you are aware, fruit is very juicy, but she paid no attention whatsoever to that fact. She let the juice dribble out of the corners of her mouth and run down her chin. Then he took out a handkerchief and wiped the juice. Before my very own eyes. And she let him do it, calm as you please. With an impish grin. She even turned toward me briefly and gave a defiant look. (p. 16)

As we ponder why, even in light of this, the woman is forcing her daughters to eat apples—there is no doubt that they are ingesting the fruit unwillingly; the apples can only be seen as punitive—we learn that the train carrying the woman's not-yet-dead husband and the apple-chomping seductress entered a long tunnel, and that in that tunnel the husband recounted to the apple-eater the story of an object difficult to conceive, a wax button. The now widowed wife is adamant that her husband, in not keeping the story to himself, betrayed her (p. 19).

The widow relates to the protagonist the story of how her husband (still knitting just across from her) came to die, and as she does so, the train enters a tunnel, albeit a much shorter one. It is long enough, however, that it puts paid to the initially positive impression

the widow had formed of the protagonist. She expels him from the cabin, and the conductor, as he does during every between-compartment interlude, between each of the stories told in the compartments, tends to the protagonist: he gives him, in this instance, a manicure (p. 20).

We have seen elements that will recur: the outlandish situation in the compartment will be followed by similar outlandishness, the story that will be told about it will be followed by other stories, the odd object will keep company with other objects, the woman who intrudes intrudes into every compartment, every tale, and the tunnel that arrives to end the episode ends each episode.

In each interlude, too, the protagonist will try to gain a better understanding of what he is experiencing. He will ask the conductor questions—the very same questions with which the reader will interrogate the text—but the conductor of the train, of the story, will provide no answers, or rather will provide answers that do not illuminate. Of the wax button:

“She lied to you,” he said after finishing three fingers on my left hand.

“Is that so?” I replied, surprised.

“It wasn’t made of real wax at all.”

“It wasn’t?”

He raised my finished hand up high, blew on it, polished the nails a bit, then took my right hand.

“It wasn’t,” he continued after finishing my ring finger, “but I’m not at liberty to say anything else, unfortunately. I’ve already told you too much.... (p. 22)

The oblique nature of the conductor’s response is typical of all of the non-explanations he offers of the phenomena witnessed by the protagonist, the phenomena the reader encounters with him.

The protagonist experiences, in order: a band of monks, silent except when in tunnels, who play backward chess: they start at checkmate and play back to the opening position; an artist who, when our protagonist refuses to disrobe, attempts to compensate for his shyness by performing a sort of cracked psychoanalysis in which he asks him a litany of questions (“And have you ever dreamed of snails swimming upstream?” “Did you ever want to be spyglass, perhaps?” etc. [p. 41, 42]); a group of young women so staunchly military that they offer our protagonist a martial meal of “Infantry cheese in gunpowder eucalyptus sauce, three bayonet olives filled with almond shot, rocket liver commando style” all to be washed down by “tank red wine” (p. 49); and this is followed (after the standard interlude: this time the conductor measures our protagonist for a suit) by a compartment containing an aged couple and their nurse, the old man a 176-year-old cannibal (he ate his first wife) kept alive (we somehow accept this) by a glass corkscrew. And each of these compartments has an object associated with it: the wax button of the first compartment; a horned egg for the

monks, a wooden dummy that the dwarf tells stories about, stories that inspire his partner, the painter; a chocolate basin for the military girls; and the glass corkscrew for the aged. Each of these objects the sinister woman (who, for the conductor, is not sinister, but an angel) has, in some way, corrupted, befouled, or simply stolen, and thus disrupted the lives lived, the stories told, in each compartment.

The last compartment is the finale in which the one story told in different, but consonant forms in each compartment, told against the backdrop of the conductor's counterpoint,¹⁴ are resolved. The protagonist enters the compartment blindfolded. A female voice—her voice?—bids him to remove it. When he does so, this is what he sees:

The wax button to my right was hexagonal, with a double ring of holes that flickered with a bluish tinge. The horned egg in the middle had two bent protuberances in its lower part resembling stunted limbs, with points that seemed to glow. The wooden dummy next to the window had been pierced at the top, and out of the hole flowed drops of liquid fire. The chocolate basin to my left contained something gelatinous and fluorescent. The glass corkscrew on the seat next to it was periodically suffused with short green flashes that seemed to come from somewhere inside. (p. 69)

Discussion with the woman in the compartment, or rather with her disembodied voice, makes it clear that there are no more compartments, that the stories have come to an end, and—he returns, at her bidding, a juicy green apple to the tree (p. 70)—things are as they should be. When he leaves this final compartment, he has a final exchange, or non-exchange, with the conductor: “We stood there facing each other for several moments. It seemed as if one of us might say something else, but when this didn't happen I smiled, bowed, and descended to the station platform” (p. 74). We descend with him, leave the compartments, *Compartments*, behind.

The remaining three books in the intrusive parcel, *Four Stories Till the End*; *Miss Tamara, the Reader*; and *Amarcord* provide further examples of Živković's fictional practice. The books already discussed and these subsequent works bear out the Serb's mastery of the story-suite, and his understanding that for fantasy to be effective it is best to employ a quiet style and to ground it in rigorous forms. In *Four Stories Till the End*, for example, the four stories take place in different, but similar, chambers: a condemned man's cell, a hospital room, a hotel room, and an elevator. Each of the stories begins with a knock on the door, and in each case the door opens four times to admit four people who tell four different stories, each of which is intriguing on its own, but enriched by the resonances it shares with stories in parallel tales contained in other stories.¹⁵

14 Unfortunately the Serbian “диригент” does not, like the English word “conductor,” mean both orchestra leader and train guard, so the pun does not quite come off.

15 Živković, Zoran. *Four Stories Till the End*. Translated by Alice Copple-Tošić. Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2010.

In *Miss Tamara, the Reader*¹⁶ each of the stories is named for a fruit, and turns on Miss Tamara's experience of reading a book while ingesting the titular fruit. The experiences, needless to add, are fantastic, and the language, even the jokes, are artfully mundane:

Although the symptoms of longsightedness had been with her for quite some time, she had hoped against all odds that she would not contract it, holding her book farther and farther away from her eyes in order to be able to read.

If her arms had been just a little bit longer she might not have had her eyes checked, ... (p. 39)

Once again, with the ordinariness of the language, and the humor, Živković draws us into a world in which reading is fraught with perils and adventures, where books intrude into one's life in ways unexpected and strange.

Amarcord, too, displays the tricks Živković performs so skillfully. Each of the chapters is named for a literary classic ("Crime and Punishment," "Dead Souls," "The Magic Mountain," etc.),¹⁷ and each has to do with memory. In case anyone misses the links joining the stories, Živković employs a blatant recapitulation of the first chapter in the last. The first chapter opens: "When I opened my eyes, it was like I'd been submerged in milk. An undefined, amorphous whiteness surrounded me on all sides" (p. 1). The final chapter opens: "When I opened my eyes, it was like I'd been submerged in milk. An undefined, amorphous whiteness surrounded me on all sides" (p. 87), and the stories continue along parallel, if not identical, courses, and of course our experience reading the stories, the first at the beginning, the last at the end, cannot be identical, for having reached the final chapter we are no longer the reader we were when we turned the first page.

The preoccupation with memory in *Amarcord* calls forth the memory of an author to whom Živković has been compared, both by the present writer and by others,¹⁸ and gives rise to a question.

Is Zoran Živković Jorge Luis Borges?

No, of course not, though given his penchant for fantasy, his wit and his bookishness, one understands the association. To say that a writer is not Borges, that he does not possess Borges's thematic range (from philosophical and metaphysical explorations to gritty tales of gaucho life) or his stylistic range (from bestiaries to reviews of non-existent books)

16 Živković, Zoran. *Miss Tamara, the Reader*. Translated by Alice Copple-Tošić. Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2010. All quotations from *Miss Tamara, the Reader* will be taken from this edition and will be noted in the text.

17 Živković, Zoran. *Amarcord*. Translated by Alice Copple-Tošić. Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2010. All quotations from *Amarcord* will be taken from this edition and will be noted in the text.

18 See, for example, Itzkoff, Dave. "Cthulu Meets Godzilla," *New York Times* April 15 2007. (accessed August 17, 2010).

is hardly to say a writer is unworthy. There have, since Borges, been no new Borgeses. Likewise, Živković cannot stand comparison with the Prague visionary and insurance-man Franz Kafka. To place Živković in the pantheon where these two masters of *fantastika* swap tales of golems and debate free will over cups of steaming *maté*, would be an intrusion that would give rise not to a good story, but rather to the embarrassment that arrives hand-in-hand with puffery. Živković's bag of tricks is more limited than those of the Argentinean trickster, his vision less piercing than that of the crow, but the tricks he does possess are pleasing, and he performs them with aplomb. His fiction is a welcome intrusion.

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