

HOMER AND ORAL TECHNIQUES

RHYS Carpenter was not only one of the first to accept an oral Homer but also quick to see the many implications and bold enough to follow through, leaving the safe shore of literary criteria to explore the trackless seas of oral tradition. Because he remains in this respect almost unique among those brought up in a pre-Parry tradition (and among many not similarly underprivileged) it seems right and fitting to make token acknowledgment of my own great debt to a great teacher by launching a plea for more oral thinking.

It is possible and even necessary to be impatient with scholars who pay lip-service to the oral composition of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but continue to use literary criteria in their analysis of the epics. Surely, anyone who is really convinced of oral composition should embrace these most ancient products of it with enthusiasm, not only for themselves, but even more for what they can tell him about oral “literature”—its structure, techniques and general characteristics—as contrasted with the written variety. That is, instead of complaining querulously that some part of an epic falls short of the ideal (literary) or does not come up to the standard (literary),¹ scholars might better exercise their very considerable ingenuity in asking both if and how the passage in question might be used as a clue to the methods and manners of the oral poet.

Let us take as examples the points made by Denys Page in the third chapter of *The Homeric Odyssey*, not that he is at all the worst offender in this respect but that the persuasive wit of his presentation makes him most dangerous. In that chapter he first asks us to share his shock and dismay at finding Athene giving self-contradictory advice to Telemachos. Having made the most of the “contradictions” he goes on to say: “this, and nothing else, is in the text; and, unless the Greek Epic is to be exempt from the normal laws of speech and thought, that text is, as a matter of fact, both incoherent and self-contradictory; not so much in language as in thought, not in details of secondary importance, but in matters relating to the main structure of the poem, expressly introducing all that is to happen in the next three Books.” He seems not to realize that his “normal laws” are literary and that this abuse of them may give us an insight into the “abnormal” laws of oral composition.

If we look at the offending passage (*Odyssey*, I, 269-296) we see that Athene advises Telemachos first to disperse the suitors, then to let his mother go home to be married from there, then to travel for news of his father (first to Pylos, then to

¹ For example: “If you ask how it can be that the world for long considered this passage to be a fit beginning to one of the greatest works in the history of literature, I reply in the words of Dr. Johnson that ‘one cannot always easily find the reason for which the world has sometimes conspired to squander praise’” (D. L. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey*, p. 57).

Sparta), then (in Page's translation, so as not to prejudice the issue) "If you hear that your father is alive and coming home, then indeed though sorely oppressed endure yet a twelvemonth. But if you hear that he is dead and gone, come back to your own native land and heap a mound for him and pay him funeral honors, all that are due, and give your mother to a husband. And when you have finished and done all this, take thought in your mind and heart how you may kill the Suitors in your palace . . ."

Some hint of the sort of thing we are dealing with here is provided by the careful specification of Nestor and Menelaos as sources of information about Odysseus. From one point of view it may look as if Athene was telling Telemachos what to do, but changing our angle of vision we see that she may be merely forecasting what he did in fact do. And it is this second order of priority and importance (first the deed and then the motive) that reflects the way in which we expect a story to grow (in contrast to the way in which a story may be contrived): first comes the hero's action; only later, perhaps as a result of audience queries, does the story-teller come to the reason for the action. Necessarily, of course, this order of growth is reversed in the telling order, but we need not be deceived by that.

Can we explain all of Athene's advice on the basis of this hypothesis, that she does not tell him what to do but rather describes in the imperative mood what, in the terms of the story, he actually did? Did he first bid the suitors disperse? Yes, this was his general purpose in his first two speeches in the assembly (II, 40 ff., 130 ff.) with the very specific command to leave in II, 139. Did he then bid his mother to go back to her father's house? No, he did not, but in II, 130 ff. he explains why he can not do any such thing in answer to Antinoos' advice that this is the only sure way of dispersing the suitors. So we can not explain all advice as simply backcasting from what actually was done. And the reasons are obvious: 1) whatever actually was done must always have resulted from a choice in which some alternative action was vetoed; 2) where either of two actions might have been a possible solution, someone will always inquire why the other was not taken. That is, one of the ways in which a story grows around any action or series of actions is by adding motivations and explanations for the action (e.g., "bid the suitors disperse"); another way is by disposing of the possibility of alternative actions in prospect so that the audience need not ask, for example, "why did he not simply send his mother back home to be married from there?" This second kind of growth, like the first, may have come less often to forestall audience queries than in response to them.

Athene's next item of advice again represents the first kind of story-growth: the why and how and where of Telemachos' travels are "backcast" from the event into her speech. It is in the two alternatives that might result from his inquiries in Pylos and Sparta that we see the second kind of growth in full bloom. We know, and the story-teller's aboriginal audience knew, that Odysseus did come home, so there was no need of considering alternatives to that. But there is all the more reason to be con-

cerned about what Telemachos might hear, since his subsequent reception of Odysseus would be affected by what he believed about Odysseus' fate and what action he might have taken as a result of that belief. So it is that Athene is used here to tell us what we can not learn in the event (because it did not eventuate) that Telemachos should learn of his father's death. It is in this alternative possibility that is only a "might have been" that Athene tells Telemachos to bury his father and marry off his mother. Page is particularly excited by this, more especially as it is followed by the command to take thought how to kill the Suitors (p. 56, Orestes is presumed to be speaking):

Allow me to say that this is a remarkably foolish instruction: this story ends, as everyone knows, with the killing of the Suitors *before* the marriage of Penelope; if she should marry one of them, the *Odyssey* will have reached a premature end. I could understand and appreciate a command to kill the Suitors *before* the marriage of Penelope: but what on earth would be the point of delaying that action until after one of them has married her? Apart from that, do you not see that after the marriage there would be no Suitors left in my palace?

These comments would be very much to the point if the *Odyssey* had sprung full-armed from the pen of a single author, but they will not do for a poem that grew and was recreated again and again in the actively participating presence of audiences. If Athene is to play her paedagogical role properly (whether as Mentos or Mentor), the audience would demand that she tell the still rather feckless boy what to do in every contingency. Obviously he must heap up a mound for his father, both because that is the pious thing to do and because it gives, as it were, substance to the death. But that is the only imaginary part of her directions; for the rest she describes what actually is to happen on Odysseus' return, merely omitting explicit mention of

Odysseus' role: that Telemachos is to resign responsibility for his mother to (her) husband and take counsel how to kill the suitors. That is, just as it was Penelope's function in life to be a wife so it was the suitors' function to be killed, and it would never have occurred to audience or bard that anything else could happen to either of them. Here was no author plotting logically how the marriage of Penelope would both obviate the necessity of killing the suitors and rid the house of them without such drastic measures; rather here was audience-bard collaboration in bondage to the facts of the story, with little will, and less power, to soar beyond them in imagination. Only so is it possible for Athene to urge that Telemachos

give his mother to (her) husband before considering the slaughter of the suitors, since it is only a husband that will have reason to join the son in revenge on the suitors, and it is only while that husband is not recognized or acknowledged that it is safe for him and both possible and necessary to do the killing.

The extent to which the audience played a part in oral composition, as hypothesized here, has been almost completely ignored. Page reckons, as it were, without this host when he expects Homer to behave like an author who, having invented his plot

and characters, is the sole authority on both, and his readers in consequence have a right to demand from him a straight story. But Homer's poems are the culmination of long growth and interaction that can perhaps be most tellingly characterized by analogy:

It seems we live in a world where anything can happen, but only certain things persist. They do so for a reason, and one may ask what it is. When I was a student, I was told that a scientist asks how, never why, yet what is truly interesting is not just the fact, for instance, that living creatures are constructed almost entirely of four natural elements—carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen—but why just those four, because then you realize that it has to be so, that there is nothing accidental about it, that only those four will do the job that is to be done. Nature is prodigal and random in her outpourings, but in the constant competition for the necessities of life, what works well is retained and what works less well is constantly discarded. The result is that there is a tendency toward constant improvement. Life is made not only to endure but to prevail. This is the way organic design works. It is design by hindsight rather than by forethought. In that sense, it is just the opposite of technological design. Technological design works by setting specifications and trying to achieve them. Organic design works by continuous selection among random variations. We are the products of editing rather than authorship. The organic process at first sight seems slow and very wasteful, but we should think well of it, for it has given us the most intricate mechanisms we know (from an interview with Dr. George Wald, Harvard biologist and Nobel laureate, in *The New Yorker*, April 16, 1966, pp. 43-44).²

An illustration of organic design in the *Odyssey* may perhaps be detected in the manifold similarities between the situations in Phaeacia and Ithaca with particular regard to Odysseus' arrival and reception. Many of the similarities are simply elements in what Lord might call the "arrival" theme and the "entertainment" theme; for example, in both palaces a bard is active, partly to accompany the festivities and partly by the recitation of "historical" material to provoke a reaction from the main character (be it Penelope, I, 328 ff., or Odysseus, VIII, 83 ff.); that a bard need not, however, play as commanding a role as do Phemios and Demodokos is apparent on Telemachos' arrival at Sparta, where a nameless singer is disposed of in one line (IV, 17), and his function is usurped by Helen, who provides the eye-witness account of what was certainly bardic material (IV, 235 ff.). Another item which should probably be taken as part of the arrival-pattern is the combination of spring and shrine just outside the city: when Odysseus arrives at the spring and shrine of Athene about which Nausikaa had told him (VI, 291 f.) he prays for a safe arrival among the Phaeacians (VI, 324 ff.); when he and Eumaios arrive at the spring and shrine of the nymphs (XVII, 204 ff.), Eumaios prays for the safe arrival home of Odysseus. Minor similarities of this sort are mostly to be understood as thematic "coincidences" and should not be used as evidence for any relationship between these two episodes other than simple parallelism.

Other similarities seem to have real significance in that they involve important

² For less casual statements by Wald, see *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, LII, 1964, pp. 606 ff. and *Scientific American*, CXCIX, 1958, pp. 100 ff.

rather than trivial matters and have not so much a general application to arrivals of all sorts as a specific relation to Odysseus' arrival—and this is important for the relationship between the two episodes—home in Ithaca. That is, various elements for the Phaeacian story are not readily explicable but are most often accounted for separately and often in a rather far-fetched fashion; a more economical and realistic solution may well be found in viewing the Phaeacian episode as modelled on the Ithacan return—a re-creation, in short. One oddity in Phaeacia leaps immediately to mind as a sample test of this theory: the unusual importance attached to Arete, the queen (VII, 53 ff., 67 ff., 75 ff., 142 ff.; XI, 338; XIII, 54 ff.). So explicit is the statement of her position that commentators have often felt impelled to invoke folk-memories of a matriarchal society, and even the poet seems to think some explanation is necessary, when he makes Athene recite Arete's royal descent in the elder line (VII, 54 ff.). But if the Phaeacian situation was patterned on that in Ithaca, this is the very thing we should expect, that the queen would be the central figure; but since she must not be a woman alone (and hence from the *Odyssey* point of view belong to the temptress-type) she must have a husband and children in a perfectly regular and civilized establishment. This combination of requirements leaves Alkinoos in a very awkward position for a husband, playing the Phaeacian version of a role somewhere between that of the dotard father-in-law and that of the immature son in Ithaca.

Will other similarities peculiar to Phaeacia and Ithaca come clear by application of this doublet-theory? To begin at the beginning, there is first the obscurity of Odysseus' arrival in both places. Here, it seems to me, we can see in operation the creative faculty of the bard-audience interaction as it adapts a borrowed motif to a different situation. That is, Odysseus had to arrive secretly in Ithaca because of the suitors; no such reason for secrecy existed in a land that was to escort him safely home.³ The secrecy-motif would perhaps therefore have been discarded unless audience conservatism evoking bardic ingenuity had not hit upon a new motive for secrecy appropriate to the new situation. That is, if Odysseus is obliged by the Ithacan model to come ashore in some unfrequented spot, he will need a guide to take him to town, preferably one who will have a strong motive for protecting and befriending him. And to judge from Odysseus' success in other lands, he is most likely to meet with such a whole-hearted response from the female of the species. Given the household of the queen as required by the Penelope model, we see that a princess will be the most admirable agent, as likely both to be attracted to a distinguished and interesting stranger and not to awaken any but the purest thoughts in his breast. Not only will this be a new variation on the "boy meets girl" theme on

³ The only hint of possible hostility on the part of the Phaeacians (VII, 30 ff.) is uttered by Athene, and included apparently on the same principle as the mist in which she cloaked him, so that neither he nor we need be distracted by interruption from passers-by, whose existence the poet might not otherwise be allowed by his audience to ignore.

which so many changes are rung in Odysseus' adventures and return, but also because it provides a stand-in for Telemachos in this new situation. A young girl's modesty with reference to what people may say then becomes as compelling a motive for Nausikaa to precede Odysseus into town as Telemachos has for exactly the same action when he follows his father's orders to leave him to the escort of Eumaios.⁴

The similarity in the roles of Nausikaa and Telemachos may be quickly explored in passing: to both Athene sends a dream to insure their arrival at the right place at the right time to meet Odysseus (VI, 2 ff., with much talk of marriage to make both Nausikaa and the audience receptive to the latent possibilities in the meeting; XV, 1 ff.); to both Odysseus at first presents himself as a suppliant who is given clothes (VI, 212 ff., and one can not help wondering if Odysseus is stripped naked for his arrival in Phaeacia so that Nausikaa may follow Telemachos' example or even if the clothes-washing gambit was designed to provide the wherewithal for this gift of clothing; XVI, 78 ff.); both Telemachos and Nausikaa respond to Odysseus when he has been newly furbished by Athene with wonder and suspicion that he may be a god (VI, 237 ff.; XVI, 178 ff.); both boy and girl give Odysseus an account of the situation which he will find in the palace (VI, 300 ff.; XVI, 245 ff.). In the later parts of the two episodes the two roles diverge, necessarily because of the nature of Odysseus' activity as well as the sex of his helper; that is, the suitor-slaying hero needs the help of an active lieutenant, but the only function possible for the helper in the Phaeacian episode is as a well-wisher, however wistful (VIII, 457 ff.).

Going back to the two narratives whence we digressed to consider the Telemachos-Nausikaa role, we find Odysseus about to enter the palaces (VII, 81 ff.; XVII, 260 ff.). In Ithaca Odysseus points out to Eumaios the royal nature of the house (its cornices and two-leaved doors) and deduces from the smell of meat and sound of lyre that there is feasting within. And presently Odysseus observes and comments on the faithful old hound Argos. In Phaeacia the poet describes for us, as Odysseus hesitates on the threshold, the physical appearance of the palace and the feasting within, all in terms that seem to be a cross between a regular palace like that at Ithaca and the never-never-land wonders of Hephaistos' establishment on Olympos. And here amongst the wonders are indeed creations of the divine smith, dogs of gold and silver to guard the house. Would they be there at all if this scene had not been compounded of one part echo and two parts free fancy?

Odysseus' reception in the Phaeacian court seems to be largely thematic material appropriate to the general situation, but two elements are both peculiar to Odysseus' particular plight and sound like echoes from his reception in Ithaca, while a third seems to have been borrowed from the Telemachy. First, there is Odysseus' insistence

⁴ Athene, taking over the escort-role of Eumaios in Phaeacia, disguises herself to fit with what must be regarded as one of the most engaging examples of Homeric humor: Nausikaa had said (VI, 300) "even a child could lead you" and Athene comes to him as a child (VII, 20).

to Alkinoos (VII, 211 ff.) on the shamelessness of the belly's demands despite toils and tribulations; this sentiment is neither necessary nor particularly appropriate for an honored guest who has just been mistaken for a god, but belongs rather to the beggarly role of Odysseus among the suitors (e.g., XVII, 470 ff.). Second, there is the motif of recognition *by* garments: Arete, seeing the stranger wearing garments of her own weaving, is apparently motivated thereby to ask who and whence he is (VII, 232 ff.). This question ordinarily needs no motivation but is the regular opening gambit (as when Penelope asks it of Odysseus as soon as he sits down beside her, XIX, 103 ff.), but the gratuitous recognition *of* garments here in Phaeacia may well be a kind of compulsive echo, in the only possible form, of the recognition motif in the conversation between Odysseus and Penelope (XIX, 215 ff.),⁵ where Odysseus convinces Penelope that he had entertained her husband before the war by describing the outfit in which he had set out for home.

The third item to be noted in Odysseus' reception is the assembly (more formulaic than necessary) in which transport is arranged for the suppliant wanderer. At first Alkinoos proposes (VII, 189 ff.) that, having summoned more of the elders next morning, they entertain the stranger, sacrifice to the gods and take up the matter of transportation for him. But when next morning actually arrives (VIII, 1 ff.) Alkinoos leads them to the assembly where he proposes launching a ship and then invites them to a feast. In a work designed and written by a single author this might be called a contradiction, but in our orally composed and organically developed *Odyssey* it is more likely to be an incompletely homogenized mixture of themes.⁶ That is, the original proposal follows what might be called the natural or regular method of dealing with an unexpected suppliant who arrives late in the day. But when we come to the actual matter of arranging transport, another pattern or model obtrudes, that of Telemachos' use of the Ithacan assembly to request a ship that will take him in search of news of his father (II, 212 ff.). That the Telemachy's use of the assembly as the place for requisitioning transport is prior to that in the Phaeacian episode is a certain deduction from its comparatively basic relevance there as opposed to the superficiality of its attachment here.

⁵ It is fairly obvious that the use of this recognition *by* garments in the present *Odyssey* is an unnecessary frill which preserves while rendering ineffective what may in some early version have been the actual means by which Odysseus established his own present *bona fides* to his wife instead of another man's twenty years earlier. It is thus an example, from a different point of view, of oral literature's thrifty practices: no motif need ever go to waste; it can like an old garment be turned, refaced and refurbished for new wear by each generation.

⁶ Compare any number of fairy tales in which various motifs are combined, often without proper adjustment one to another. For example, Grimm no. 91, where the following motifs are either misapplied or not properly exploited: castle with tempting food (here is not a trap but just a convenient place to stay); little man who responds to kindness with information (here responds only when beaten up); delousing of dragons (here not to gain information but as a simple pastime); token of victory (here not used to identify victor but simply forgotten).

It is in the context of the Phaeacian assembly that Homer has given us one of the most compelling of the oddities in this episode: that the Phaeacians were making trial of Odysseus in contests (VIII, 22 f.). It might well be, as has frequently been suggested, that this is a vestige of the motif of the Unprepossessing Unknown who wins the suitor-contest in popular literature. In that case, however, we should be somewhat suspicious of a tradition that was either capable of applying to the Returning Husband as a passing adventure what should be an end-game play for the Enchanted Prince or else so lacking in invention as to be unable to bring Odysseus to a land of Marine Rescuers without misusing bits and pieces from other themes. But is it any better to assume that the whole situation is an echo or duplicate (with differences) of that in Ithaca? This question must, for the present at least while we are so unversed in the techniques of oral literature as to have no real basis for judgment, be left unanswered while we go on to see exactly in how far the contests in Phaeacia echo the Suitor Contest in Ithaca.

After the initial statement that Athene made Odysseus more impressive so that he might win contests in which the Phaeacians were testing him (VIII, 22 f.), nothing more is said about any such Phaeacian intention, and Odysseus' participation in the events when it does come is motivated almost accidentally by the rude taunts of a young man (VIII, 159 ff.). The neatness and economy of this is striking, if indeed the Phaeacian situation echoes that in Ithaca. That is, the model requires that Odysseus take part in a contest with numerous young men, but it is not easy to motivate such action where Odysseus is a guest to be entertained; the stroke of genius came in utilizing another motif from the model, the taunts that met Odysseus' request to make trial of the bow, to make Odysseus' entrance into this contest seem perfectly appropriate and natural. In this way, Euryalos' sneering remark that the stranger was no gentleman (VIII, 133 ff.) not only echoes the insults of Antinoos and Eurymachos (XXI, 285 ff.) but also motivates the otherwise unlikely participation of the stranger in contests which seem to exist only as an echo of the Bow Contest. The essential neatness is pointed up by the way in which it is caddishness that is the charge in both situations: the suitors object to the beggar's entering the bow contest because he is no gentleman; the young Phaeacian concludes that the stranger is no gentleman from his refusal to enter the contests. The ingredients are the same; the mixture is different.

The music and dance which follow the contest in Phaeacia (VIII, 250 ff.) may be an echo of the festivities which Odysseus orders simulated after the contest and slaughter of the suitors (XXIII, 131 ff.), and perhaps the rather peculiar timing of the stranger's bath in Phaeacia (VIII, 425 ff.) results from Odysseus' delaying his first bath in Ithaca (XIII, 150 ff.) till after he has slain the suitors and made arrangements for singing and dancing (such as immediately preceded the Phaeacian bath).

If we grant that the parallels between the Ithacan and Phaeacian arrivals of

Odysseus are sufficiently clear to suggest that the former provided the material for the latter, we must ask not only why Phaeacia was modelled on Ithaca but also why the Phaeacian episode was brought into the story at all. The answer to both questions may come from a consideration of still one more parallel between the two situations: in both contexts Odysseus gives a recital of his ten years' adventures (IX, 1 ff.; XXIII, 306 ff.). That the second recital is often denounced as a late interpolation need not concern us here since it is only on the basis of literary criteria that such a judgment can be made. From the point of view of oral composition and organic design it is clear that the second recital is there not because someone inserted it but as a vestigial remnant of some original fabric which the conservatism of both bard and audience would be reluctant to excise even after new improved versions included elsewhere a more extended recital.

Let us imagine for a moment how it may have been. An early (sub-Mycenaean?) Song of Odysseus would have been a fairly short account of how the hero returned home, slew the suitors and then described to his wife the difficulties that had kept him away. It is likely that in this early version, as is often suggested, Odysseus' adventures were those that are presented in the five lies or variations on a basic theme suitable for the five different audiences to whom the beggar explains himself (XIII, 256 ff.; XIV, 192 ff.; XVII, 419 ff.; XIX, 165 ff.; XXIV, 303 ff.). With oral composition's thrifty conservatism these adventures were not thrown out when the tale was brought up to date with the opening of new lands and seas (first the Black Sea and then the West) but were economically adapted to give a background for the beggar. That the adventures had to be brought up to date will surprise no one in view of Telemachos' statement (I, 351 f.):

*τὴν γὰρ αἰοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
ἣ τις ἀκονόντεσσι νεωτάτῃ ἀμφιπέλῃται.*

Then as the Song was recreated and recomposed generation after generation both Revenge and Adventures were subject to much accretion, but because of their respectively complex (Revenge) and compound (Adventures) structure the latter could expand to a far greater size than the former. As it did so the effect must have begun to be that of the tail wagging the dog, with the comparatively compact and tightly woven revenge story introducing a long, loosely strung together series of adventures that could well have been anti-climactic. It was at this point (or even before) that some bard must have had the bright idea, to change the metaphor, of putting the horse before the cart and allowing the adventures to precede the revenge. That does not mean that the adventures were told as they happened (as narrative by the poet), for with or without the *Iliad's* example of encapsulating a long story within a comparatively short episode, it seems to me highly likely that Odysseus' adventures were always recounted by him rather than described by the poet. This seems right

partly because of folk literature's love of a story within a story and partly because the chronicle form could never have been as popular as the organic (and organized) whole; the chronicle is too much like life ("just one damned thing after another"), and only by a process of selection, subordination and interrelation does it become sufficiently artificial to be satisfying.

So it became necessary to have Odysseus tell his adventures before the revenge. There were two possibilities: he could tell them to Penelope as soon as he arrived in Ithaca before disposing of the suitors; or he could tell them to a surrogate Penelope in a situation where, as in the original, a moment of calm succeeded to trouble and strife. I rather doubt that the former alternative was ever seriously considered since not only would it be unreal and as disturbing to the audience as a performance on the edge of an active volcano but also all the time-honored conventions of disguised and surprise attack would be lost, to say nothing of the need to save the recognition scene till success is won. If then there is to be a surrogate Penelope, and also a feeling of unthreatened leisure, Odysseus must tell his story in the midst of what is to be his last adventure, when safe return is already assured and when he has shown himself victorious in some contest. These requirements, combined with audience conservatism and bardic preference for well-marked trails as opposed to uncharted seas, produced the wonderful Phaeacians, marvelous alike for their science-fictionlike society (whether built from Minoan memories or Utopian yearnings) and for the similarity of their reception of Odysseus to what he is to find in Ithaca. Here we have both novelty and conservation in a radical use of traditional materials. Here we have the variation as well as the theme, and an illustration of the almost cell-like division and organic growth of oral literature. The result is not carbon-copy duplication but "the mixture as before" with enough of the familiar to give comfort and reassurance and enough of the different to provide wonder and excitement.

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