

Emerson's Schellingean Natures: Origins of and Possibilities for American Environmental Thought

As Naturezas Schellinguanas de Emerson: Origens e Possibilidades do Pensamento Ambientalista dos Estados Unidos

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Abstract: Emerson was not a close reader of the history of German idealism, yet his work is pervasively influenced by this idealism. Charles Peirce often argued that ideas have their own lives and that the best thinkers see what is next implied in a historical trajectory. This seems an apt way to think of the relationship between Emerson and Schelling. In some ways, Emerson is quite directly influenced by Schelling's writings, especially those writings to which he was exposed by Frederic Henry Hedge. In other ways, Emerson simply moved into the spirit of Schelling's transcendental idealism. Some of the specific Emersonian ideas attributable to Schelling's influence are the "Over-Soul," natural divinity, fate, and nature as a living organism. In his two essays on nature, then, Emerson reveals traces of Schelling's thought and puts these traces to work in an American setting. My specific goal in the short essay that follows is to show what some of the consequences of Emerson's Schellingeanism were for later American conceptions of the natural environment.

Keywords: Emerson. Schelling. Nature. Organism. American environmentalism.

Resumo: *Emerson não foi um grande leitor da história do idealismo alemão; no entanto, sua obra é completamente influenciada por esse idealismo. Charles Peirce frequentemente sugeria que as idéias têm vida própria e que os melhores pensadores vêem qual o próximo passo implicado numa trajetória histórica. Essa parece ser uma boa maneira de pensar a relação entre Emerson e Schelling. De certo modo, Emerson é completamente influenciado de maneira direta pelos escritos de Schelling, principalmente aqueles a ele apresentados por Frederic Henry Hedge. De outro modo, Emerson simplesmente acompanhou o espírito do idealismo transcendental de Schelling. Algumas das idéias especificamente emersonianas atribuíveis à influência de Schelling são a "Sobre-Alma", a divindade natural, o destino e a natureza como um organismo vivo. Então, em seus dois ensaios sobre a natureza, Emerson revela aspectos do pensamento de Schelling e coloca esses aspectos para funcionar num contexto dos Estados Unidos. Meu objetivo específico neste pequeno ensaio é mostrar algumas das conseqüências do schellinguanismo de Emerson para concepções estadunidenses posteriores do ambiente natural.*

Palavras-chave: Emerson. Schelling. Natureza. Organismo. Ambientalismo nos EUA.

I often find myself frustrated with contemporary debates on what has come to be called “the environment” because parties of thinkers contend for my affection and drive me constantly to outmoded puzzles of either/or. Either I am “green” or I am “not-green.” I am either a conservationist or a preservationist. And so on. These puzzles strike me first and foremost as lingering effects of the analytic tradition of the twentieth century; indeed, even Richard Rorty, who challenged that tradition from within, is fond of leading his readers into these sorts of box canyons by way of his own *sic et non* method. This habit, I think, overlooks the insights of several other philosophical traditions that seek to see continuities as well as disjunctions in both experience and nature. In what follows, then, I want to turn to one such tradition — New England transcendentalism — and explore what it might have to offer us regarding the complexities of our relationship to nature. To accomplish this, I offer a commentary on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Nature,” and along the way suggest avenues that might be further explored were we to take Emerson’s insights into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ conversations regarding “environmental issues.”

Emerson was not a close reader of the history of German idealism, yet his work is pervasively influenced by this idealism. Charles Peirce often argued that ideas have their own lives and that the best thinkers see coincidentally what is next implied in a historical trajectory. This seems an apt way to think of the relationship between Emerson and Schelling. In some ways, Emerson is quite directly influenced by Schelling’s writings, especially those writings to which he was exposed by Frederic Henry Hedge. In other ways, Emerson simply moved into the spirit of Schelling’s transcendental idealism. Some of the specific Emersonian ideas attributable to Schelling’s influence are the “Over-Soul,” natural divinity, fate, and nature as a living organism. In his two essays on nature, then, Emerson reveals traces of Schelling’s thought and puts these traces to work in an American setting. My specific goal is to show what some of the consequences of Emerson’s Schellingianism might be for later American conceptions of the natural environment and to suggest that we still might have something to learn from Emerson’s Schelling-like conception of nature.

For some folks, the New England Transcendentalists seem like the original environmentalists. They wrote extensively about nature and they seemed to take seriously the notion that European Americans were on some sort of “errand in the wilderness.” Some of them tried, though most unsuccessfully, to live simplified lives and lived, as it were, off the land. Most notably Ripley’s Brook Farm and Alcott’s Fruitlands were aborted attempts at living communally and more simply with the land. In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau went so far as to speak a word for nature and wilderness. Indeed, at one point in the text Thoreau addresses our tendency to over-civilize ourselves, and sounds quite contemporary:

Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.¹

¹ THOREAU, *Portable*, p. 598.

Despite the suggestiveness of such readings of the Transcendentalists, they bear a trace of anachronism — their eyes were not always on the same mark as those of contemporary environmentalists however much they say things along the way that agree with our contemporary sensibilities. On this score, Emerson is an even more challenging figure than Thoreau. Emerson wrote no platform on environmental issues, but he did write two essays bearing the title “Nature.” In commenting on the latter of these, which appeared in *Essays: Second Series*, I hope to distill a few Emersonian ideals, albeit vaguely constituted, concerning our relationship to what we have now come to call “the environment.”

Most readers are more familiar with the earlier of Emerson's two essays, the 1836 *Nature* that established his reputation as a thinker and writer. This essay sets up Emerson's basic orientation concerning the relationship between persons and nature. The later essay develops this relationship in significantly more detail, attending to its nuances. Emerson, true to his own insights on philosophical writing, never presents a straightforward argument concerning our obligations to nature or the environment; instead he gives the reader sufficient material to discern an outlook revealing a complex understanding of these obligations. Concerning nature, then, I have found at least four Emersonian conceptions working together. Nature in its most common meaning is the apparently fixed environment of things in which we find ourselves — *natura naturata*. This nature, however, reveals a secondary feature — dynamic or living beauty. At another level, insofar as we humans are natural, we constitute another, and an active, mode of nature — *natura naturans*. The transaction between these two modes constitutes yet another Emersonian Nature — the place and the process of the dialectical development of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. This environing Nature is occasionally identified as Being or Soul. In his original *Nature*, Emerson identifies nature with whatever is “not-me”: “Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men, my own body, must be ranked under this name, Nature.”²

Drawing on the dialectical distinction that Schelling, following Fichte, used to bring epistemology and ontology together, Emerson gives to nature the role of one's environment — what is outside and other than oneself. Taken in itself, this not-me is “objective,” a presentation for the agency of the ego; it is thus *naturata* or “natured.” Emerson, in down-to-earth fashion, proceeds to characterize the “natural” side of this nature in its “common” and “philosophical import”: “*Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf.”³ This description puts us in mind of wildness and wilderness. Unqualified, this nature is simply an aggregate of things or commodities. But Emerson pushes further, locating in this nature an aesthetic power of an independent, objective sort that can stand on its own in judgment of us. This dual “not-me,” environmental account of nature makes us see it as one's “other” and therefore as crucial to any understanding of oneself. Thus, as we will see, Emerson

² EMERSON, *Complete Essays*, p. 4. Emerson makes a clear distinction here between the “natural” and “artificial” dimensions of *natura naturata*. Though the distinction is an important one and raises interesting questions, I will focus for the purposes of this paper on the “natural” side of divide.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

later adds two more conceptions of nature: *natura naturans*, or the agency of the “I,” and the all enviroing Nature that is the source of and context for transactions between the active agent (the ego) and the not-me. In “Self Reliance” we are offered a foreshadowing of our place in this larger Nature. Without personifying Nature, Emerson describes our dual status: “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.”⁴

The first half of Emerson’s later “Nature” essay trades on the uses of the not-me presentation of nature in its objective form. Emerson begins at home: “There are days which occur in this climate, at almost any season of the year, wherein the world reaches its perfection, when the air, the heavenly bodies, and the earth, make a harmony, as if nature would indulge her offspring...”⁵ Calling on New England’s natural beauty, Emerson begins by examining his own home environment. Later, he invites readers to begin to consider their own local, natural perfections. As we will see, *any* place can reveal nature’s perfections.

This not-me environment of perfection satisfies us in our finitude and invites us to explore: “At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish.”⁶ Emerson forces us to hear “man of the world” ironically, since “world” in this phrase aligns with civilization, which is now to be trumped and judged by the natural “world.” Nature, as we enter, compels us to reorient — it judges us, our actions, our beliefs, our habits of living. “Here,” says Emerson, “is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes.”⁷ Nature’s perfection, as we enter its surroundings, shows us possibilities beyond our habits, practices, and conventions, and “judges like a god all men that come to her.”⁸ Two necessities of import appear here. There must *be* such a nature to which we have access *and* we must choose to enter into it and to suffer its judgment.

Nature as it judges us by way of its perfections may shame us, but its work is not fulfilled unless it also inspires us and propels us toward new possibilities. It must be “stimulating and heroic” — for Emerson, there is at least the possibility that Nature — in the widest sense — is self-ameliorating. In his initial essay, Emerson marked this edifying dimension as the “Beauty” of nature through which “the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*.”⁹ Nature, as perfecting wilderness, has a de-civilizing effect so that we can refresh ourselves and come to our senses. It is one condition of our re-civilizing. “I am,” says Emerson, “taught the poorness of our invention, the ugliness of towns and palaces.”¹⁰ Thus, as we enter this not-me, this enviroing Nature, we feel its healing and inspiring powers. Our pretensions are stripped away, we are made to feel our own finitude, and, ironically, out of this proportioning of ourselves we learn of our empowerment: “We nestle in nature, and draw our living as parasites

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

from roots and grains, and we receive glances from the heavenly bodies, which call us to solitude, and foretell the remotest future."¹¹

Emerson develops the aesthetic powers of nature in one example after another, illustrating how human life is raised in every corner by nature's objective and awesome presence as *natura naturata*. Here we find the Emerson that so enthralled John Muir and Walt Whitman, whose experiences seemed documented by Emerson's mental journey. But just as we are about to be tempted into a full blown romance with nature *or* to be put off by the poet's euphuism, Emerson makes a turn in the text — a dialectical re-turn from the not-me to the active "I." "It is easy," says Emerson, "to outrun the sympathy of readers on this topic, which schoolmen call *natura naturata*, or nature passive."¹²

This dialectical turn is foreshadowed in the essay "Experience" when Emerson reminds us that "Nature, as we know her, is no saint." Rather, "She comes eating and drinking and sinning."¹³ Moreover, the turn brings *us* — persons — back on the scene; until now, we had been silent observers and the objects of Nature's judgment. Nature — now in its fullness — is not consummated until the agency of the "I" appears on the scene; nature's agency in part runs *through* us, through human endeavor. "The sunset is unlike anything that is underneath it: it wants men. And the beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking, until the landscape has human figures, that are as good as itself."¹⁴ We hear in this the foreshadowings of Lamarckian evolution and Bergson's vital force. *Natura naturans* is nature in action — doing, creating, making, moving. Here we humans are thoroughly implicated. Nature is now not an objective environment but a creative environing. We *are* this aspect of nature, and we become "not ourselves" if we slip into the state of mere witnesses of nature's judging perfection.

The deep sense of democracy that John Dewey noted in Emerson's thinking manifests itself in the last half of "Nature" and foreshadows the focus in "Nominalist and Realist" on our representative natures. Each of us represents an angle of vision through our particular excess and talent, and we must each rely on others for any sense of wholeness or community. For Emerson we give nature a character, we constitute Nature's natures. Emerson sees possibility in each of us though he admits that "Man is fallen" and "nature is erect." We *are* living, natural possibility however debilitated: "if our own life flowed with the right energy, we should shame the brook."¹⁵ *Natura naturans* begins in nature's motions — its heat, pressure, transformations — and moves with a hard fatality toward, and perhaps beyond, *us*: "It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato..." Emerson sees nature's habits of action wherever he looks: "The whirling bubble on the surface of a brook, admits us to the secret of the mechanics of the sky."¹⁶ Nature as action and verb is not the still life beauty of *natura naturata* but exceeds the still life in its ability to transcend itself or, in the words of the pragmatists, to ameliorate. We, as conscious creators, *are* nature in its active form. The idealists' dialectic

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 410.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

of the ego and the not-me shows us that nature has two co-dependent aspects; it is here we must find and accept our own importance as *natura naturans* without abandoning the importance of the judgments of *natura naturata*. We must embrace our freedom but without hubris. With John Muir we must be receptive to nature's beauties and her aesthetic judgment of our lives; and with Gifford Pinchot, we must accept the responsibilities of making and re-making our world. In short, we must be both Muir and Pinchot if we are to fare well in our world and bring some divinity to bear on finite experience. "Let us be men instead of woodchucks," Emerson chided.¹⁷

Emerson reflects on the order of nature — its consistency and its organization. He reflects on the originary "push" that set the world in motion — his version of the Big Bang. But like William James and Charles Peirce some years later, Emerson recognizes imbalance in the order — the atom swerves and things run to excess. Nature naturing — human action — is a risk: "without a spice of bigot and fanatic, no excitement, no efficiency."¹⁸ It is just this imbalance that gives us the life to be creative, to generate our own beauties and energies. But this same imbalance puts us at risk for failure: "No man is quite sane; each has a vein of folly in his composition, a slight determination of blood to the head, to make sure of holding hard to one point which nature had taken to heart."¹⁹ This is both the adventure and the danger of how humans are natured; we represent both nature's risks and its possibilities. This is an experiential truth that resists the probing critiques of determinists and fatalists. As Emerson later wrote, "nature usually in the instances where a marked man is sent into the world, overloads him with bias, sacrificing his symmetry to his power."²⁰

This slight insanity leads to our exemplary human endeavors, but invariably comes with a price to pay. This is our representative nature, and it arises even in our own ordinary experiences — in our youthful diaries: "Days and nights of fervid life, of communion with angels of darkness and of light, have engraved their shadowy characters on that tear-stained book."²¹ The upshot of our representativeness and imbalance is that while we realize many human possibilities, we always fall short in some respect; we remain in need of the judgment of *natura naturata*. "All promise," Emerson says, "outruns performance. Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions."²²

For Emerson, the extreme danger of this imbalance and slight insanity is systematic egoism. We have a tendency to overrate our thoughts and abilities, and we then try to set ourselves outside of and above nature. "The man runs round a ring formed by his own talents," warns Emerson, "falls into admiration of it, and loses relation to the world. It is a tendency in all minds."²³ We build a New York or a Chicago, and come to believe that merely exercising our powers is enough; we become mad, excessive, and blind versions of Pinchot. Thoreau later warned of such blindness:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 717.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 718.

I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place all around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise.²⁴

The issue here is not any specific environmental issue; the issue is about ontological attitude. To be stubbornly blind to nature precludes our ability to fulfill well our own natural role as *naturans*.

Emerson's cure — or at least his treatment — for this poverty of attitude was to keep humans alert to what's around them:

The antidote against this organic egotism are the range and variety of attractions, as gained by acquaintance with the world, with men of merit, with classes of society, with travel, with eminent persons, and with the high resources of philosophy, art, and religion...²⁵

"Acquaintance" is the key — no thin, academic knowing of nature and environment will suffice. One must engage nature directly to know by acquaintance; this is the enduring relevance of wilderness to human beings. We need only think of those who write and politicize about the poor and the marginalized, never having shared their experiences. Even when such talk is useful, it remains blind and unacquainted to that particular angle of experience suffered by the impoverished. One exemplar of those acquainted with nature as natured was, for Emerson, the farmer, who "times himself to Nature, and acquires that livelong patience which belongs to her."²⁶ If we move outside western culture, we find many whose sense of time is governed not by clocks and calendars but by the moods of the local environment. In spite of this, we in the "west" still often seek to dominate nature while remaining unacquainted with it. Then, Emerson says, "We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God."²⁷

As the second "Nature" essay concludes, Emerson returns to *natura naturata*, now not as judge of our creativity but as a reflection of our limitation. "There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape."²⁸ The mood has shifted and the moment of perfection has passed. Emerson reminds us of the complexity of nature natured: "But Nature is as subtle as she is strong [...] all things are flowing, even those that seem immovable."²⁹ Nature reminds us in yet another way of the dangers of hubris, of getting "above our raising." But it also provides a temptation to cynicism: "Are we tickled trout, and fools of nature?" Are we, then, puppets in the hands of nature, living an illusion of freedom and empowerment? Emerson rejects cynicism while admitting limitation. He returns to the central thought of the poem that opens the essay: "Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast, And all is clear from east to west."³⁰ This is the final dialectical turn of the text.

²⁴ THOREAU, *Portable*, p. 598.

²⁵ EMERSON, *Complete Essays*, p. 721.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 750.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 753.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

The opposition of — or the tension between — the ego and the not-me is finally overcome when they work together. Instead of reducing the active ego to another deadened aspect of the not-me, the active ego must learn to work in league with the not-me — there it will find its empowerment: “But if, instead of identifying ourselves with the work, we feel that the soul of the workman streams through us, and the fathomless, powers of gravity and chemistry, and, over them, of life, preexisting within us in their highest form.”³¹ The attitudinal orientation is crucial to our dealings with nature; we must abandon “hostility to nature” and seek a “child’s love to it [...] to expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons.”³² The work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Andy Goldsworthy comes to mind in this context — how can we produce in such a way as not to deracinate nature’s own aesthetic powers? The power of the artist and the poet is not merely human; they act in and through nature so that their “power consists in the multitude of [their] affinities, in the fact that [their] life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being.”³³ Insofar as we live in this nature of approximations, change, and possibilities, we must avoid dogmatic stances that entrench us in outmoded environmental themes. The natural attitude, as it were, is the one that moves with nature. Again, the wild side of nature is exemplary for the wild side of experience, and reveals to us both limitation and possibility if we are attentive. “In the wilderness,” Emerson says, “I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages.” The lover of nature and of the wild becomes one “whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other...”³⁴

Emerson is no deep ecologist nor is he a user and taker of nature. The normative story woven into the fabric of “Nature” is more subtle and more complex. Emerson is at once a romantic naturalist and a practical Yankee, but in such a way as to bring these characters/natures into a working harmony. We cannot get on without civilizing, without making, building, learning, creating, and enjoying; indeed, civilizing is always re-civilizing. But Emerson looks for the tempering constraints on our agency. We must learn from nature how to build well, how to live erectly, and how to create beauty. This requires a preservation of a wilderness into which we might enter — places where nature may continue to shame us and keep us attentive. It requires also that we recognize in ourselves the very limitations on perfection that nature shows us. We must maintain some humor and humility as we civilize ourselves and nature. We must preserve and conserve, even as we find new ways to make ourselves better. “Environmentalism” in Emerson’s hands cannot be a story of opposition — on the contrary, it is a story of reciprocity, of transaction, and of integration. If I kill off nature, I will lose myself not just physically but personally. If I am too natural or wild, I will lose myself in yet another way; I will become the berry-eating woodchuck.

What is the practical upshot? Certainly no recipe for maintaining the environment. One of Emerson’s points would be that we shouldn’t look for recipes. We find ourselves in nature and we find our own acts to be natural ones. The trick of moving to higher platforms, to ameliorating any present transactions we conduct with nature, is to attend

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

to the perfections nature presents us. We know these special “days” of nature because of their experiential impact on us — we needn’t seek abstract criteria to identify them. But to learn from them, wherever we are, we must attend to them. “The difference between landscape and landscape,” Emerson says, “is small, but there is great difference in the beholders.”³⁵ At the same time, we must embrace our agency and develop our worlds of art and science under the influence of these days of perfection. Again, no recipe, no narrow set of criteria; we must enspirit our actions with nature’s divinity. Then, finally, we must beware hubris and egotism in our successes; we must remain attentive to our own madnests and fragilities. There is always more to be done, farther to go — the circles of growth move ever outward: “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile.”³⁶

Drawing the lessons of Emerson’s “Nature” into twentieth and twenty-first century conversations of environmentalism is too much to hope to accomplish here. But we can begin a sketch by noting that both John Muir and Gifford Pinchot with their relative emphases on beauty and utility capture a side of Emerson’s thinking about our relationship to nature as not-me. But to find a twentieth century thinker who more carefully balances and integrates these features, we might turn to Aldo Leopold as one who captures the spirit of Emersonian environmentalism. Leopold clearly understood that humans are agents in this world — he was a practical man who enjoyed working in nature; he enjoyed what Emerson called “the plain pleasures, kindly and native to us.”³⁷ But some of his actions he found to be judged by nature, by the earth’s own ways of being, and these judgments persuaded him to alter his own ways of being in the world. He experienced an awakening at the hands of nature. His “land ethic,” he said, “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”³⁸ Whatever rules we employ — whatever “land ethic” we might develop, we need to be guided by this sort of dialectical movement wherever and whenever. Even if Leopold takes us a step in an Emersonian direction, there is more to be found in the workings of the transcendentalist vision. The contemporary environmentalist is in step with Emerson when claiming that we all have a stake in nature and that it is “up to us” to act. “Nature,” says Emerson, “sends no creature, no man into the world, without adding a small excess to his proper quality.”³⁹ Because of our excesses, we *will* make a difference in our and in nature’s features — the question is not *will* we “affect the day,” as Thoreau put it, but *how* will we affect the day? This is the point of a Schellingian beginning in a dialectic of the I, the ego, and the not-me. We find ourselves, then, right where Emerson found us. We are in nature and nature is in us, and the task is to keep our balance and bring some beauty to bear on our future. This requires most fundamentally an attitude that is at once receptive to nature’s language and open to human possibility. The only fatal excesses are a runaway cynicism and an unconstrained hubris. In those cases, we lose our senses and with them our sensitivity to our precarious but important place in Nature’s natures.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 407.

³⁸ LEOPOLD, p. 204.

³⁹ EMERSON, *Complete Essays*, p. 414-5.

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