

The Mistaking¹ of the Subject Supposed to Know by Jacques Lacan

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Translated by Jack W. Stone

(31) What is the unconscious? The thing has not yet been understood [comprise].

The effort of psychoanalysts having been for decades to reassure on this discovery, the most revolutionary one there was for thought, from taking its experience as their privilege – it is true that its acquisition remained deprived of appreciation – things arrive at their relapsing into the bad habit that this effort itself opened them up to, from being motivated in the unconscious: from having wanted to reassure themselves, they succeeded in forgetting the discovery.

They had all the less trouble doing this in that the unconscious never leads astray better than when caught in the act [*sur le fait*], but above all in that they omitted noticing what Freud denoted of it: that its structure falls under the blow of no representation, it being rather its custom to have only considered masking itself (*Rücksicht auf Dars-tellbarkeit*²).

The politics that any calling forth of a market supposes can only be a falsification: one gave to it innocently, for want of help from the "human sciences." Thus, one did not know that this was one except from wanting to make reassuring the *Unheimlich*, the not at all reassuring [thing] that is the unconscious, by its nature.

The thing being admitted, anything is good to serve as a model to account for [*à rendre compte de*] the unconscious: the *pattern* of behavior, the instinctive tendency or even the phylogenetic trace where can be recognized Plato's reminiscence: – the soul has learned before birth – the developmental emergence that falsifies the meaning of the phases called pre-genital (oral, anal), and side-slips into pushing the genital order to the sublime . . . We must hear the analytic mummery getting carried away with this,

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France in an unexpected fashion distinguishing itself for pushing it to the (32) ridiculous. This is corrected insofar as one knows everything that can be covered up there: the least discreet coprophilia on occasion.

Let us add to the list teleology, so as to split off the ends of life from the ends of death. All this from being nothing other than representation, an always naïve intuition and, to say it, the imaginary register, is assuredly air to swell the unconscious for every-

¹ "Méprise" is usually translated as "mistake," "error," or "misapprehension." I have chosen to translate it as "mistaking" to underscore a certain specificity of its usage in French not as clearly implied in any of these other translations. According to *Le Littré*, "méprise" refers specifically to the mistaking of a person or thing for another person or thing and thus it cannot generally refer, for instance, to an error or mistake in mathematical calculations. The translation "mistaking" also has the advantage of leaving it indeterminate who is doing the mistaking, an indetermination that seems to me consistent with what Lacan says about the subject supposed to know here and elsewhere [tr.].

² "regard for (or considerations of) representability" [tr.].

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one, indeed a song to give rise to the desire to see it in no one. But it is also to con each of us with a truth that glitters only to lend itself to false apprehensions [*fausses prises*].

But how then are they demonstrated false, one will say to me, what the devil do you mean?

– Simply from the incompatibility where the deceptiveness of the unconscious is revealed, from the rhetorical overburdening Freud shows it to argue for. These representations add up, as is said of a pot [*chaudron*], the offense of which is removed from it not having been loaned to me 1°, from, when I had it, it already having a hole in it 2°, from its being perfectly new 3°, at the moment of my returning it. And put it like that if you are going to show me where you will. All the same, it is not from the discourse of the unconscious that we are going to glean the theory that accounts for it.

That Freud's *apologue* makes us laugh proves that it hits home. But it does not dissipate the obscurantism that relegates it to the amusing trifles.

This was what I made people yawn over for three months, in letting loose the luster from which I believed once and for all illuminated, my audience, in demonstrating to it in Freud's *Witz* (translated as *mot d'esprit*) the articulation itself of the unconscious. It was not that I lacked verve, if one believe me, nor, I dare say, talent.

There I touched on the force from which it results that the *Witz* be unknown to the battalions of the Institutes of Psychoanalysis, that "applied psychoanalysis" was the department [*rayon*] reserved for Ernst Kris, the non-doctor of the New York trio, and that the discourse of the unconscious be a condemned discourse: it is only in fact sustained by the post without hope of any metalanguage.

It remains that the cunning [*les malins*] are less so than the unconscious, and this is what suggests opposing it to Einstein's God. We know this God was not at all for Einstein just a manner of speaking, when rather it must be said he put his finger on him from what imposed itself: that he was complicated, certainly, but not dishonest.

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This means that what Einstein holds in physics (and this is (33) here a fact of the subject) as constituting his partner is not a bad player, not a player at all, that it does nothing to mislead him, that it does not play at all to put a finer point on it.

Does it suffice to trust in the contrast from which would be highlighted, let us mark it, how much more simple the unconscious is – and since it rolls the cunning, must we place it higher than us in what we believe to know well by the name of dishonesty? It is here that we must be prudent.

It does not suffice that it be clever [*rusé*], or at least that it seem to be. Concluding here is done quickly for the callow youths [*les béjaunes*³] whose every deduction will be found stuffed with it in from then on. Thank God! that for those I have had to deal with, I had the Hegelian history at hand, said to be of the ruse of reason, to make them feel a difference where we are perhaps going to make understood why they are lost in advance.

Let us observe the comical, – I have never stressed it for them, for with the dispositions we have seen in them above, where would that have gone? – the comical in this reason in which there must be these interminable detours to lead us to what? to what the end of history designates as absolute knowledge.

³ From *bec jaune* (yellow beak), a term from falconry that refers to a young, untrained falcon. It is sometimes used to refer to a young, stupid, inexperienced person [*La Littré*] [tr.].

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Do we recall here the derision of such a knowledge the humor of a Queneau was able to forge, from his being trained on the same benches as I in Hegel, his "Sunday of life,"⁴ or the advent of the idler and the good-for-nothing, showing in an absolute laziness the knowledge proper to satisfy the animal? or just the wisdom authenticated by the sardonic laughter of Kojève who was master to both of us?

Let us hang on to this contrast: the ruse of reason would in the end lay down its cards.

This leads us back to what we have passed over a little quickly. If the law of nature (God of physics) is complicated, how is it that we only attain to it by putting into play the rule of simple thought, to be understood: that which does not redouble its hypothesis in a way that would render any superfluous? Is it that what is imaged in the mind of Occam of the razor would not allow us, from the end we know, to pay homage in the unconscious to a thread that, all told, is revealed quite decisive?

There we have what introduces us perhaps better to this aspect of the unconscious, by which it does not open so long as it does not follow that it closes.

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Thenceforth toughened against a second pulsation? The thing is (34)clear from the warning where Freud had so well foreseen what we began by noticing, of the reaggregation of repression produced in the average clinic, trusting in his disciples to put theirs in, from an inclination all the better intentioned as it is less intentional to give into what is irresistible in behaviorism to pave this way.

Where the present thesis allows us to grasp what is formulated, for whoever reads Freud, in our school at least: that the behaviorist discipline is defined by the denial [dénégation] (Verneinung) of the reality principle.

Is this not where to return to its place the operation of the razor, in underscoring that my polemic is no more here than elsewhere digressive, in demonstrating that it is at the joint itself of psychoanalysis at the object it gives rise to that the psychoanalyst opens his direction [sens] from being its practical refuse?

For, where it seems I am denouncing as treason the inadequacy of the psychoanalyst, I am tightening my grip on the aporia from which I am articulating this year the psychoanalytic act. An act that I found on a paradoxical structure in that the object is active in it and the subject subverted, and where I inaugurate the method of a theory in that it may not, in all correctness, take itself for irresponsible for what is proven of facts by a practice.

So it is to the quick of the practice before which the unconscious was made to pale, that I have now to take its register.

We must have there what I sketch of a process knotted from its own structure. Any critique that would be a nostalgia for an unconscious in its first flower, for a practice in its still wild boldness, would itself be pure idealism. Simply, our realism does not imply progress in the movement sketched by simple succession. It does not imply it at all because it takes it for one of the crudest fantasies of what deserves every time to be classified as ideology, here as an effect of the market inasmuch as it is supposed by exchange value. There the movement of the universe of discourse must be presented at least as the increase of interests composed of a revenue from investment.

⁴ Lacan is alluding here to Raymond Queneau's 1951 novel *The Sunday of Life* (*Le dimanche de la vie*), which is prefaced by this quotation from Hegel: ". . . it is the Sunday of life, which levels everything and distances everything that is bad; men gifted with such good humour cannot be deeply bad or vile" (Gallimard) [tr.].

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Only, when there is no idea of progress, how are we to appreciate regression, the regression of thought, naturally? Let us observe how much this reference to thought is subject to a caution
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so long as it is not defined, but it is also that we cannot (35) define it so long as we have not answered the question of what the unconscious is. For, the unconscious, the first thing to be said about it, which means its: what it is, the *quod est*, τὸ τί ἦστί, inasmuch as it is the subject of all that can be attributed to it, is what Freud in fact said of it to begin with: it is thoughts.

Moreover, the term regression of thought has all the same the advantage here of including the pulsation indicated by our preliminaries: this movement of predatory retreat of which the suction in some manner voids the representations of their implication of *connaissance*, this sometimes by the admission itself of the authors who prevail over this voiding (behaviorist, or mythologizing in the best case) and sometimes in that they only sustain the bubble by stuffing it with the "paraffin" of a positivism even less in season here than elsewhere (migration of the libido, so-called affective development).

It is from the movement itself of the unconscious that proceeds the reduction of the unconscious to unconsciousness, where the moment of the reduction eludes us from not being able to be measured either from the movement or the cause.

No claim of *connaissance* would be appropriate here, since we do not even know if the unconscious has a proper being, and it is from not being able to say "that's it" [c'est ça] that one has given it the name of "it" [ça]. (Es in German: in the sense of "it gets nasty" ["ça barde"] or "it gets screwy" ["ça déconne"]). In fact the unconscious "is not that" ["c'est pas ça"], or else "that's it, but gummed up" ["c'est ça, mais à la gomme"⁵]. Never the last word ["Jamais aux p'tits oignons.⁶"].

"I am a tricker of life," says a four-year old kid as he curls up in the arms of his genitrice, before a father who responds: "you are handsome" to his question "Why are you looking at me?" And the father does not recognize (even though the child had in the interval feinted it from having lost the taste for himself from the day he spoke) the finessing that he himself attempted on the Other, in playing the Dummy [du mort]. It is for the father who told me this to hear me or not.

Impossible to rediscover the unconscious without putting *all* the gum⁷ in it, since it is its function to erase the subject. Whence the aphorisms of Lacan: "The unconscious is structured like a language," or again, "The unconscious is the discourse of the Other."

This reminds us [rappelle] that the unconscious is not from losing memory; it is from not recalling oneself *from* [se rappeler *de*]⁸ what one knows. For it must be said, in keeping with
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⁵ *À la gomme* is an idiom that can be translated as "crummy," "useless," "pathetic," or "hopeless." I have retained in my translation something approaching its literal sense to make it resonate with the reference to *gomme* (as in "gum eraser") below.⁶ *Aux petits oignons* (literally, "with spring onions") is an idiom generally meaning "the last word" in the sense of "the last word in luxury" [tr.].

⁷ cf. note 5 [tr.]⁸ Lacan appears here to be literalizing an idiom (*se rappeler de*) generally used to mean "to remember" or "to recollect." [tr.]

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(36) the usage of the non-purist: "*je m'en rappelle,9*" that is: I recall myself to the being (of the representation) beginning from that. From what? From a signifier.

I don't recall myself there any longer. This means, I do not rediscover myself therein. It [Ça] does not call me toward any representation from which it would be proven that I have lived there.

This representation is what one calls memory [souvenir]10. Memory, the slipping beneath, is from two sources that one has confused up to now:

- 1) the insertion of the living being [le vivant] into the reality that is what it imagines and that can be measured in the manner in which the living being [il] reacts there;
- 2) the link of the subject to a discourse where it can be suppressed, which is to say, not know that this discourse implies it.

The formidable tableau of the amnesia said to be of identity should here be instructive.

It must be implied in it that the usage of the proper noun, inasmuch as it is social, does not give over that its origin is there. Thenceforth one can call amnesia the order of eclipse suspended at its loss: the enigma is all the better distinguished by the subject's not losing any benefit of learning in it.

All that is of the unconscious only plays on the effects of language. It is something that is said, without the subject representing himself nor saying himself in it, – nor knowing what he says.

The difficulty is not there. The order of indetermination constituted by the relation of the subject to a knowledge passing beyond him results, one can say, from our practice, which implies it, insofar as it is interpretive.

But that there might be a saying there that is said without *one* [on] knowing (37)who

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says it, it is from this that thought shies away: this is an on-tic resistance. (I am playing on the word *on* in French, which I make, not without justification, a support of being [l'être], an, ^n, a being [étant], and not the figure of omnitude: in brief, the subject supposed to know.)

If one [on], the omnitude, has ended up habituating itself to interpretation, it is all the more easily in that this has been done for quite a while, by religion.

It is even through this that a certain academic obscenity, which calls itself hermeneutics, has buttered its bread from psychoanalysis.

In the name of *pattern*, and of the phylos evoked above, of the love-standard that is the philosophers stone of the intersubjective fiduciary and without anyone ever

9. "Of this, says the subject, I have no recollection" ["*De ceci, dit le sujet, je ne me rappelle pas*"]. That is: to the call of a signifier of which it would be necessary "that it represent me for another signifier," I do not respond "present," for the reason that from the effect of this call, I no longer represent anything for myself. I am camera obscura that has been illuminated: no longer any means for the retobepainted through its pinhole the image of what happens without.

The unconscious is not subliminal, a feeble brightness. It is the light that does not make room for the shadow, nor to insinuate its contour. It represents my representation there where it lacks, where I am nothing but a lack of the subject.

Whence Freud's term: representative of the representation [représentant *de la représentation*]. [Lacan]

10. It is amusing to note here that: *se souvenir de* [to remember], comes from *se rappeler de* [to recall] – disapproved of by the purists – which is attested to from the XIVth century. [Lacan]

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being given pause by the mystery of this heteroclit Trinity, interpretation gives every satisfaction . . . to whom in this instance? Above all to the psychoanalyst who deploys in it the beatific moralism from which the lowly are said to be the most high.

Which is to say the one who covers himself up by only acting in any case for the good: conformism, inheritance and reconciliatory fervor, make up the triple breast that offers this to the small number who, from having heard the call, are already chosen.

Thus the stones where his patient stumbles are no more than the cobbles of his good intentions, his own, a manner no doubt for the psychoanalyst not to renounce the influence of hell to which Freud was resigned (*Si nequeo flectere Superos . . .*).

But it was perhaps not to this pastoral, from this shepherding idea, that Freud proceeded. It suffices to read him.

And his having called the drive mythology does not mean that what he shows there should not be taken seriously.

What is demonstrated there, we will say rather, is the structure of that desire of which Spinoza formulated that it is the essence of man. This desire, which from the desideration it admits to in the romance languages, undergoes here a deflation, which leads it back to its de-being [désêtre].

And it is quite comical, if the psychoanalyst has indeed touched on the fact that, from its inherence in the anal drive, gold is shit, to see him cram with his finger the wound in the side that is love, with the pommade of the authentic, of which gold [l'or] is *fons et . . . origo*.¹¹

This is why the psychoanalyst no longer interprets as in (38) the good old days [belle époque], as one knows. This is for his having himself sullied the living spring [source vive].

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But he must toe the line, wean, which is to say he corrects desire and he imagines he weans (frustration, aggression, etc.). *Castigat mores*, let us say : *ridendo*?¹² No, alas! This is without laughing: he castrates the customs [les mœurs] of his own ridicule.

Interpretation, he shifts it onto the transference which leads us back to our *on*.

What the psychoanalyst of today spares the analysand is indeed what we have said above: it is not what concerns him, that he soon lends himself to gobbling up since one puts forms there, the forms of the potion . . . He will open his gentle little pecking beak; open it, not open it. No, what the analyst covers up, because he himself is covered up in it, is that he might say something to himself, without any subject knowing it.

Mene, Mene, Tekel, Uphar'sin.¹³ If this appears on the wall for the all the world to read it, it topples for you an empire. The thing is reported in a good place.

But with the same breath, one attributes the farce to the All-Powerful, so that the hole is re-closed with the same stroke with which one reports it, and one does not guard

11 "source . . . and origin" [tr.]^[SEP]12 "Criticize customs . . . with laughter." [tr.]^[SEP]13 The words mysteriously inscribed on the wall of King Belshaz'zar's palace, and interpreted by the prophet Daniel as follows:

MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.^[SEP]TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.^[SEP]PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:26-28, *K.J.V.*)

[tr.].

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against the fracas itself serving by this artifice as a rampart for the desire major, the desire to sleep. That which Freud made the final instance of the dream.

However, could we not grasp that the only difference, but the difference that reduces to nothingness what it differs from, the difference from being, that without which the Freud's unconscious is futile, it is that the one opposed to all that was produced before him under the *label* of the unconscious, he marks well that it is from a place differing from any taking [prise] of the subject that a knowledge is delivered, since it is only returned to what is of the subject the mistaking [méprise]?

The *Vergreifen* (cf. Freud : mistaking is his word for acts said to be symptomatic), passing beyond the *Begriff* (or the taking), promotes a nothing affirmed and imposed in that its negation itself indicates it in the confirmation that will not be lacking in its effect in the sequence.

A sudden question is raised, from making appear the answer that re-fortified from it being supposed. The knowledge that only delivers itself to the mistaking of the subject, what indeed can be the subject to the knowledge before that?

(39) If the discovery of the transfinite number, we can quite well suppose it as being opened by Cantor's having stumbled into twiddling with the decimals dia-

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gonally, we are not going for all that to reduce the question of the furor that its construction let loose for one Kronecker. But that this question does not mask for us the other one concerning the knowledge arisen in this way: where can one say that the transfinite number, as "nothing but knowledge," awaited the one who had to make himself its finder? If it is not in any subject, in what *on* of being is it?

The subject supposed to know, God Himself to call him by the name given to him by Pascal, when one specifies as his contrary: not the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, but the God of the philosophers, the one flushed out from his latency in all theory. *Theoria*, would this be the place in the world of theology?

– Of the Christian one assuredly since it exists, by means of which the atheist appears to us the one who holds to it most strongly. One suspects it: and that this God was a little sick. It is not the ecumenicalist cure that is going to render him more hardy, nor the Other with a big O, that of Lacan, no more so I fear.

As for the *Dio14*-logy that it would be appropriate to separate from it: and of which the Fathers range from Moses to James Joyce in passing through Meister Eckhart, it seems to us that it is again Freud who best marks its place. As I have said: without this place being marked, psychoanalytic theory would reduce itself to what it is for better and for worse, a delusion of the Schreberian type: Freud himself is not mistaken there and does not recoil from recognizing it (cf. precisely his "Schreber case").

This place of God-the-Father is what I have designated the Name-of-the-Father and that I planned to illustrate in what should have been the thirteenth year of my seminar (my eleventh at Sainte-Anne), when a passage to the act of my psychoanalyst colleagues forced me to put an end to it, after its first lesson. I will never take up this theme again, seeing there the sign that this seal would not know how to be lifted again for psychoanalysis.

14 "Dio" (διο) is a Classical Greek conjunction meaning "wherefore," or "on which account" (Lidell- Scott). It is also the Italian word for God [tr.].

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In fact it is to a relation so gaping that is suspended the position of the psychoanalyst. It is not only required to construct the theory of the mistaking essential to the subject of the theory: what we call the subject supposed to know.

(40) A theory including that must be rediscovered at every level, be inscribed here in indetermination, there in certitude, and form the knot of the uninterpretable, I am employed there certainly not without

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experiencing an atopia without precedent. Here is the question: who am I to dare such an elaboration? The answer is simple: a psychoanalyst. This is a sufficient answer, if one limits its scope to my having of a psychoanalyst, the practice.

Now it is indeed in the practice to begin with that the psychoanalyst has to be equal to the structure that determines him not in its mental form, alas! that is indeed where the impasse is – but in his subject position as inscribed in the real: such an inscription is what properly defines the act.

In the structure of the mistaking of the subject supposed to know, the psychoanalyst (but who is, and where is, and when is – run the gamut of categories, which is to say the indetermination of his subject – the psychoanalyst?), the psychoanalyst however must find the certitude of his act and the gap that makes its law.

Shall I go on to remind those who know something about it, of the irreducibility of what remains at the end of the psychoanalysis, and that Freud pointed out (in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*) under the terms of castration and indeed penis envy?

Can it be avoided that in addressing myself to an audience that nothing prepares for this intrusion of the psychoanalytic act, since this act is only presented in disguises that degrade it and deviate it, the subject my discourse defines, does not stay what it remains for our reality of psychologizing fiction: at worst the subject of representation, the subject of Bishop Berkeley, point of impasse of idealism, at best the subject of communication, the intersubjective of the message and information, in no position even to contribute to our affair?

Although one has been for making me appear at this gathering, to the extent of telling me I was popular in Naples, I cannot see in the success of my *Écrits* more than the sign that my work emerges in this moment of universal foreboding, which arose from other more opaque emergences.

This interpretation is surely correct, if it is proven that this echo is produced beyond the French field, where this reception is explained better by the exclusion where I have maintained it for twenty years.

(41) No critic, since the appearance of my book, having done his job which is to account for it [*rendre compte*], apart from one named Jean-Marie Auzias, in one of those little pulp paperbacks [*livres-torçons*] of which the lightness in the pocket

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does not excuse the typographical negligences, called: *Keys of Structuralism*: chapter IX is devoted to me and my reference is utilized in the others. Jean-Marie Auzias, I repeat, is an estimable critic, *avis rara*.

Despite his case, I only expect those I speak to here to confirm the misunderstanding.

Retain at least this that is testified to in the text I have tossed out for your consideration [*jeté à votre adresse*]: it is that my enterprise does not pass beyond the act

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where it is a taking, and that therefore this act [elle] has no chance except from its mistaking. Again it must be said of the psychoanalytic act that in being from its original revelation the act that never succeeds so well as from being failed [manqué], this definition does not imply (any more than elsewhere in our field) reciprocity, the notion so dear to psychological divagation. Which is to say that it does not suffice that it founder [échoue] for it to succeed, that the failure [ratage] alone does not open the dimension of the mistaking here in question.

A certain slowness of thought in psychoanalysis, – in leaving to the games of the imaginary all that could be proffered of an experience pursued at the place where Freud had done so –, constitutes a failure without any other signification.

This is why there is a whole part of my teaching that is not the psychoanalytic act, but a thesis, and a polemic inherent to it, on the conditions that redouble the mistaking proper to the act, from a defeat [échec] in its decline.

From not having been able to change these conditions, leave my effort in the suspense of this defeat.

The false mistaking, these two terms knotted in the title of a comedy of Marivaux, finds here a renewed sense that implies no truth of discovery. It is in Rome that in memory of a turning point in my enterprise, I will give tomorrow, as well as I can, the measure of this defeat with its reasons.

The outcome will tell if it remains pregnant with the future that is in the hands of those I have trained.

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