

The Double as Other: Alterity, Doubling, and the Crisis of Identity in Edgar Allan Poe's Tale "William Wilson"

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Abstract— *The relationship between the Self and the Other has occupied a central position in philosophical, psychoanalytic, and literary theories of identity. This paper will advance beyond the classical conception of Otherness as a process whereby societies construct Otherness to subordinate and legitimize the exclusion of an external Other. Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" offers a more inward and psychologically complex configuration of alterity which is localized within the contours of the schizophrenic Self through the figure of the double. The second William Wilson is simultaneously a rival, a moral counterforce, a reflection, and an unsettling counterpart to the narrator's identity. Drawing on concepts from Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis and theorization of the uncanny, Sartre's philosophical insights, and Derrida's thoughts on difference and alterity, the paper examines how Poe destabilizes the opposition between Self and Other. It shifts attention from what the double represents to what the double does to the narrator's conception of identity. The double repeatedly interrupts the narrator's autonomy, appearing whenever the protagonist attempts to pursue his desires without moral or social restraint. His eventual attempt to eliminate the double consequently becomes an attempt to eliminate a constitutive part of himself. The final mirror scene makes this paradox explicit: in destroying the Other, the narrator discovers that he has destroyed himself. Poe's tale thus suggests that identity is neither autonomous nor self-contained but emerges through an unstable relationship with alterity. The ultimate aim of this paper, however, is to read Poe's story as a celebration of the idea that despite being a 'hell', the Other is always part and parcel of the Self's identity.*



Keywords— *Alterity, Edgar Allan Poe, uncanny, identity, psychoanalysis, Doubling, literature*

I. INTRODUCTION

The distinction between the Self and the Other is fundamental in the philosophical, psychoanalytic, and literary discussions of identity. The Self is not constituted in isolation but rather becomes decipherable through difference, reflection, recognition, and interaction with what it perceives as the external Other. The concept of Alterity/Otherness has been approached differently among scholars and theorists, be they philosophers like Emanuel Levinas (1969), Friedrich Hegel (1977) and Jean Paul Sartre (1989), psychoanalytic theorists like Sigmund Freud (1955) and Jacques Lacan (1977), or post-colonial theorists like Edward Said (1978) and Homi Bhabha (1994). Having been mobilized and applied in different intellectual

frameworks, the common postulation as regards the concept of alterity/Otherness is that it is indubitably a process of signification. That is to say, there is forever a process of negotiation and dialogue between the self and the Other insofar as the very act of departure from the Self towards the Other is *per se* an infinite process of signification and meaning-construction. In literary and cultural studies, for example, the Other has been examined as an external figure against whom the Self establishes its identity. Such approaches have been particularly vital in studies of race, colonialism, gender, and belonging. Yet alterity can also be located much closer to the subject. The Other may emerge not outside the Self but within it, as an internal difference

that destabilizes the subject's attempt to understand itself as unified and autonomous.

In this paper, nonetheless, the Other, particularly envisaged as an entity, will be broadened to include not only the Other localized outside the Self but also Otherness that exists within the Self, epitomized predominantly by the Alter ego and/or the double Self. In other words, this paper will advance beyond the commonly simplistic conception of Otherness as a process whereby societies construct Otherness to subjugate a particular community or legitimize the exclusion of another through mainly recognized mechanisms of stigmatization and Othering. This paper sets out to bring to light another type of Alterity, one that is not peripheral and remote from the Self but rather localized within the contours of the Self, conjuring, thus, Freud's theorizations concerning the apparatuses of Self as being made up psychologically of the ego, the id, and the alter/super ego. Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" provides a creative literary representation of this inward form of alterity. First published in 1839, the tale narrates the life of a man who encounters another individual who bears his name and resembles him in appearance, manner, voice, and temperament. The paranoid and schizophrenic narrator, William Wilson, encounters William Wilson, his mirror image/Alter ego/Double self/Big Other, in childhood, and spends the rest of his life trying to escape from him, from one school to another and from one country to another. The second William Wilson repeatedly appears at moments when the narrator strives to exercise his freedom, pursue his desires, or engage in morally questionable conduct. He interferes with the narrator's ambitions and repeatedly jeopardizes his individuality and agency. Eventually, in a masquerade in Rome, the narrator attacks and apparently kills his double. Yet what seemed to be a destruction of the Other ironically turns out to be the narrator's own destruction.

Recent scholarship has explored Poe's "William Wilson" from several perspectives. Jones (2018), for example, interprets Poe's double as a figure associated with conscience and psychological struggle. Kennedy (2018) examines Poe's construction of terror as an analytical and psychological process. His approach is useful for "William Wilson" because the terror generated by the double does not depend solely on physical threat. Oliveira and Indrusiak (2019) approach "William Wilson" through Freud's concept of the uncanny, emphasizing the disturbing relationship between familiarity and strangeness. Building on this scholarship, the present paper strives to ask a somewhat different question: what does the double do to the relationship between the Self and the Other? Rather than treating the second Wilson simply as a manifestation of conscience, a psychological projection, or a supernatural

antagonist, this article understands him as a figure of internal alterity. The double appears outside the narrator, but ironically his very existence incessantly returns the narrator to himself. He embodies an alterity that the narrator cannot successfully place outside his own identity. That said, we cannot help but raise a spectrum of inquiries such as: can the super/alter ego be regarded as an Other insofar as it curbs the self and limits its freedom and agency? Is the blaming voice we hear oftentimes from our inner self/alter ego whenever we are on the verge of a wicked act, a mere Other that seeks to annihilate, efface, and incarcerate the Self? Can we, put differently, live without the Alter ego and hence without the Other? How important is the Other for constructing and forging the identity of the self? Does the effacement of the Other entail the end of the Self? If no, can we, then, deem the very existence of the Self as being inherently and dialectically tied up to the very existence of the Other?

The article therefore argues that Poe's double transforms the conventional relation between Self and Other. William Wilson represents alterity as constitutive rather than merely oppositional. The Other is initially experienced by the narrator as a barrier to agency, superiority, and desire. Yet the narrative gradually unearths the way this Other is inseparable from the narrator's own identity. The attempt to eliminate the Other consequently becomes an attempt to establish a completely autonomous Self, an attempt that can ironically culminate in the annihilation of the self.

II. ALTERITY AND THE RELATIONAL CONSTITUTION OF THE SELF

To analyze Poe's *Williams Wilson* requires working with different theoretical frameworks. Hegel, Sartre, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida provide the conceptual and analytical vocabulary for understanding the philosophical problem dramatized by the tale. To begin with, it should be noted that Alterity is like meaning in that it makes no claim to fixated signification and finitude but rather celebrates non-fixity and infinitude. Given that its meaning is intrinsically surplus, in a Ricoeurian sense (1976), Alterity can also be viewed as an 'empty signifier' or 'floating signifier', deploying Levi-Strauss's neologism (1987), to indicate that the meaning of Alterity is incessantly changing and hence is not fixed. In the most general of terms, Alterity refers to the condition of being other or different, wherein the Self becomes recognizable through distinctions between itself and what it is not.

For Hegel (1977), the Other is not merely a mirror reflecting an already existing identity; rather, self-consciousness emerges through a struggle for recognition in which the subject becomes aware of itself through another

consciousness. That is to say, it is the Other who essentially sparks off the awakening of the self-conscious subject and the making/reaffirming of his identity. Therefore, there is a form of reciprocity, negotiation, and dialectic between the self and the other, entailing that the Self cannot exist without the Other and vice versa. This principle becomes particularly obvious in Poe's "William Wilson" when the narrator encounters his double. He does not encounter someone radically different but someone who resembles him so closely that the dissimilarity between Self and Other becomes blurred.

Hegel's popular "master-slave dialectic" posits that the Self only becomes fully conscious through recognition by the Other. He maintains, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (1977, 111). Emmanuel Levinas (1969; 1985), however, pushes this ethical framework further. For him, the interaction with the Other is not just a site of mutual formation, but the very basis of ethics. Alterity, for Levinas, is thus inherently irreducible and always beyond the grasp of the Self.

Levinas's ethical philosophy challenges the dominance of ontology and epistemology by arguing that responsibility toward the Other precedes knowledge and comprehension. He posits that ethics serves as the foundation of the relationship between the Self and the Other, and argues that this relationship is irreducible, as it cannot be quantified or understood. Levinas' understanding of Alterity is further underpinned by the concepts of 'exteriority' and 'transcendence' towards the Other. (1969). This perspective emphasizes the idea that the transcendental Other remains perpetually beyond the self's grasp. Regardless of the Self's efforts to comprehend and grasp the Other, this Other remains an enigma, perpetually eluding the grasp of the Self.

Derrida extends this problem of irreducible difference through his theory of *différance*. Derrida asserts that '*différance*' is an inherent characteristic of all human signifying systems and practices, as language itself is inherently grounded in a system of free play and differences. Hence, signification, including the meaning of the Other, is intrinsically unattainable and unstable. The meaning of the Other constantly evolves beyond the boundaries and contours of time and space. Influenced by Levinasian ethics, what is noteworthy in Derrida's ideas in relation to Otherness is his contention that we are all Others to one another. As he puts it, "every other is every other other, is altogether other." (1995, 68). Poe's narrative dramatizes this problem precisely. The narrator tries to establish an absolute distinction between himself and the second Wilson,

but the more he attempts to do so, the more the narrative reveals their connection. Sartre offers another influential account of the Other by focusing on the conflict between self-consciousness and external perception. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that the gaze of the Other transforms the subject from a free consciousness into an object of perception. The Other is therefore both necessary for self-awareness and threatening to personal autonomy. This tension is famously expressed in Sartre's play *No Exit*, where the character Garcin declares, "L'enfer, c'est les autres" ("Hell is other people") (1949, 47).

Psychoanalytic theory further complicates the relationship between self and Other by locating alterity within the subject itself. Freud's concept of the uncanny provides a different but complementary perspective. The uncanny arises when something familiar becomes strange or when what has been repressed returns in an unsettling form (1955, 217–256). The double is one of the most important embodiments of this process. A duplicate of the Self is simultaneously familiar and alien. Following Freud, Lacan confounds the problem by emphasizing that subjectivity itself is constituted via relations of identification and alterity. Lacan upholds that there are two types of Other; one is labeled as the Big Other (*Autre*) and the second is the little Other (*autre*); (Lacan 1977, 1–7). The Little Other is "the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the Ego", while the Big Other designates 'radical Alterity', an otherness which transcends the illusory Otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification". This distinction is important because the second Wilson should not simply be identified with Lacan's "Big Other." The Big Other refers primarily to the symbolic order—the field of language, law, and social structures within which the subject becomes intelligible. The second Wilson is better understood as a figure through whom the narrator encounters the instability of his own subjectivity. He is an embodied counterpart who repeatedly exposes the limits of the narrator's fantasy of autonomy.

Through these theoretical underpinnings, Poe's "William Wilson" can be understood as a narrative of failed self-mastery and agency. The double represents not merely a psychological anomaly or supernatural figure but a philosophical confrontation with alterity itself. Together, these approaches demonstrate that Poe's tale anticipates modern theories of identity by portraying the self as relational, fragmented, and inseparable from the presence of the Other.

III. THE SELF BEFORE THE GENESIS OF THE DOUBLE

From the very outset of the tale, the narrator, William Wilson, who seems to undergo a kind of paranoia and psychosis (a particular mental status qualified as neurosis to utilize a Freudian word) takes us back throughout his childhood and depicts his personality with a set of negative images and associations which he says are inherited from his parents. The narrator constructs himself as an individual characterized by willfulness, ambition, passion, and a desire for domination to the extent that even his parents failed to curb his evil propensities. As he retrospectively puts it,

I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. As I advanced in years it was more strongly developed; becoming...a cause of serious disquietude to my friends, and of positive injury to myself. I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions. Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. (1839, 1)

These negative characteristics of the Narrator as the Self go hand in hand with the Self's desire for freedom, independence, and domination. Accordingly, the school was the space in which this identity is performed and wherein he could project his evil propensities. By so doing, he earns not only power and despotism but also a sense of superiority over his fellow students. These characteristics establish a conception of the Self based upon autonomy. The narrator wants to act according to his own desires rather than submit to external authority. His identity is therefore constructed through freedom and superiority. Nonetheless, William's sense of freedom, superiority, and authority is threatened and rather destabilized by the sudden appearance of a rival, an Other whose name is, like the narrator, Williams Wilson. The second William Wilson therefore does not simply introduce competition. The double thus appears at the precise point where the narrator's conception of himself as singular begins to fail.

IV. THE IDENTICAL OTHER AS A THREAT TO THE SELF: *THE OTHER IS HELL*

The paranoid narrator, having fully recognized the existence of a competitor and imagined Other, felt that his freedom, superiority, and power were at stake of being annihilated by this Other. For the narrator/self, this Other signifies rebellion, resistance, and a source of embarrassment; hence the narrator is intimidated by this

Other who, put it differently, jeopardizes the superiority of his Self. In fact, this feeling of being endangered by the existence of an Other who possesses the same qualities as the Self, and who is the emblem of resistance, epitomizes the perpetually eternal struggle between the Self and the Other. In this regard, the narrator maintains, 'Stepped he (the Other) in between me and my ambition!' (1839, 12). This structure resembles Sartre's conception of the Other as a challenge to the subject's freedom. What is significant about this Other, as we shall find out later on towards the end of the tale, is that this Other is but the double Self or the unconscious of the narrator who, as above-mentioned, suffers from neurosis. This Other is different from other Others insofar as this Other is not different from the Self, but equal and identical to the Self. The narrator describes the uncanny similarities:

The same name! the same contour of person! the same day of arrival at the academy! And then his dogged and meaningless imitation of my gait, my voice, my habits, and my manner! Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that what I now was the result, merely, of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation? (1839, 8)

The narrator's response unearths the fact that identity is already rooted in difference. He wants the name "William Wilson" to identify him uniquely. The existence of another William Wilson makes that uniqueness impossible. The significance of the double lies in the fact that the narrator cannot simply dismiss him as another person. The resemblance is rather excessive. He shares the narrator's name, appearance, manner, and many characteristics. The narrator therefore encounters not an ordinary Other but an Other who threatens the very basis upon which he distinguishes himself from others. To confront the menace inflicted by this Other/ Williams Wilson/double self, the narrator/Williams /the Self maintained that he used to tell superficially funny jokes about the Other so as to induce pain in the Other. This later idea reflects how the Self is always seeking to demolish the Other before the Other can destroy the Self, thus signifying perpetual conflicts. The second Wilson is represented as being powerful with no 'Heel of Achilles', and this even renders the effacement of the Other almost an impossible endeavor. The double therefore reverses the conventional structure of alterity. The Other is normally imagined as someone whose difference allows the Self to recognize itself as distinct. In *William Wilson*, however, the Other is threatening because difference cannot be secured and maintained. This unstable position produces the tale's central paradox.

V. THE AMBIVALENT OTHER AND THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY

The narrator's relationship with his double is not simply one of hatred, but profoundly ambivalent. He fears the second Wilson because he cannot defeat him easily. Yet he also recognizes qualities in the double that he does not possess himself. Given the sameness and startling congenialities between the Self and the Other, the second Wilson will undeniably 'thwart, astonish, and mortify the self' and hence serves as an obstruction for the Self in its endeavors to attain its ambitions and desires. The narrator helplessly utters, "I secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority; since not to be overcome cost me a perpetual struggle" (1839, 4).

Nevertheless, despite the Other bringing about an incessant anxiety for the Self through rivalry, the Self "couldn't hate him altogether" (1839, 5). Ambivalently enough, the dignity of the Other is ubiquitous throughout the tale. This dignity is somewhat patent when the Narrator senses that although he has triumphed in more or less all quarrels, which gives him a sense of pride, satisfaction, and domination, unequivocally it is the second Wilson who deserves to triumph. Moreover, the narrator cannot bring himself to hate this Other, although it is a source of terror and like 'hell', as Sartre claims. The narrator cannot simply hate him because the qualities that make the double threatening are also qualities that the narrator cherishes and celebrates. This attraction and repulsion dialectic foregrounds the ambivalent relationship between the self and the Other/double Self. Freud's theory of the uncanny helps explain this emotional contradiction. The uncanny is not simply the unknown. It is the familiar defamiliarized. The second Wilson is frightening because the narrator recognizes something of himself in him. The double therefore represents the return of an identity the narrator cannot acknowledge. This also explains why the narrator repeatedly attempts to flee. "I fled in vain. My evil destiny pursued me" (1839, 12).

Williams admits, while referring to the second Wilson, that it is "difficult, indeed, to define or even to describe my real feelings towards him (1839, 5). This quote is very much telling of how the Self's exteriority towards the Other, in Derridean sense, is deferral, mysterious, and out of reach in the sense that despite the self's desire to know and apprehend the Other, this Other is always irreducible and mystifying. The narrator goes on to say that "He...was, for many anxious months, a riddle I could not resolve" (1839, 5). This language of uncertainty is central to the tale. The narrator seeks to identify the Other, but the Other resists

definitive identification. As he asks, "But who and what was this, Wilson? and whence came he? and what were his purposes? Upon neither of these points could I be satisfied" (1839, 9). To mobilize Levinas and Derrida, this lack of final resolution is significant. The second Wilson cannot simply be transformed into an object of knowledge. The attempt to know the Other always encounters something that escapes complete conceptualization and understanding.

Williams Wilson, the narrator, loses his personal identity when he discovers a classmate, who later on turns out to be his Double Self, shares not only his name but also his physical appearance and manner of speaking. A name signifies and establishes individuality. It distinguishes one person from another and provides a symbolic marker of identity. In Poe's tale, however, the name is duplicated. The narrator is deeply troubled by this duplication: "I felt angry with him for bearing the name and doubly disgusted with the name because a stranger bore it. (1839, 5). The second Wilson's possession of the same name therefore produces a symbolic crisis.

This inexorably foregrounds how the identity of the Self is radically affected by the mere presence of the Other. Williams continues to reject any congeniality between his Self and the second Wilson in terms of identity; he emphasizes, "the feeling of vexation, thus engendered grew stronger with every circumstance tending to show resemblance, moral or physical, between my rival and myself" (1839, 5). The imagined Other, who is ironically the Self, in his imitation of the self induces the self with an overwhelming feeling of embarrassment that affects the identity of the self negatively. He writes, "Wilson's rebellion was to me a source of the greatest embarrassment" (1839, 4). This is where the tale's treatment of alterity becomes sophisticated. By demonstrating that identity cannot be reduced to uniqueness, the Other does not merely threaten the Self from outside but from within.

VI. THE DOUBLE AS MORAL COUNTERFORCE

As it will be obvious towards the closing scene of the tale, the second Wilson, whom the Self considers as a threat, an impediment, and a rival, is not bona fide in the sense that the congenialities existing between the Self and the double Self are recognized only by the Self. As the narrator maintains,

How greatly this most exquisite portraiture harassed me, (for it could not justly be termed a caricature,) I will not now venture to describe. I had but one consolation —in the fact that the imitation, apparently, was noticed by

myself alone, and that I had to endure only the knowing and strangely sarcastic smiles of my namesake himself. (1839, 6)

This thrust us to regard this Other not as an external character but as a mere construction of the paranoid imagination of the Self to protect himself from the irrepressible behaviors of his dark side. Drawing on psychoanalysis, the formation of a double self is a strategy for the Self to defend himself from the destruction of the ego. In this creational process, the double Self serves as the manifestation of the ego's repressed desires and fantasies, finding eloquent expression in a human form, which is but the Other.

Poe's tale evidently draws our attention to how the imagined Other is but the Alter ego and the Big Other in the Lacanian sense. The concept of alter ego is of great significance in this symbolic tale. It denotes the part of the Self that curbs the ego's malign desires. In *William Wilson*, the narrator, as the embodiment of the ego/Self, maintains that the second Wilson, as the incarnation of the Alter ego, interferes in the will of the Self in the form of hinted advice. Jones (2018) identifies precisely this dimension of Poe's doubles, emphasizing their function as conscience or an inner judge. The second Wilson's interventions are ethically crucial because they occur when the narrator is on the verge of morally destructive behaviors. The double does not merely follow the narrator at random; rather, his appearances coincide with moments when the narrator is about to violate moral or social boundaries. As the narrator observes: "This interference often took the ungracious character of advice; advice not openly given, but hinted or insinuated." (1839,6). Furthermore, the narrator acknowledges that his life would have been better had he listened to the whispers of the Other/Alter ego, which highlights the role of the Other in the survival of the Self, and bears witness, as well, to the ambivalent stance of the Self towards the Other who is both a source of menace and a source of wisdom and morality.

Alterity and the Limits of the Autonomous Self

The last scene in *Williams Wilson* is tremendously emblematic and enthralling, in which the narrator/Self unexpectedly encounters the second Wilson in a masquerade wearing a similar costume. The setting becomes symbolic insofar as the masquerade serves as a space of disguise and performance. In the ending's visual climax, and while feeling intense anxiety, the narrator drags the Double Self into a room, then stabs him, assuming the death of his antagonist, whereas ironically and tragically the narrator, after looking at the mirror, realizes that he had murdered himself. While dying, the Double Self

incongruously addresses the Self and says "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead-dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist-and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself" (1839, 14). The mirror is therefore not merely a decorative Gothic object but rather it becomes the material symbol of the Self/Other relationship. This climactic tragic scene can be understood symbolically as questioning and hinting at the key role of the Other in the formation of the Self and subjectivity. It appears to postulate that the Self cannot live without the Other, and that the effacement of the Other will lead inevitably to the death of the Self. The article therefore proposes that the final destruction of the double should be read not simply as the destruction of conscience or the triumph of evil but as the collapse of the distinction between Self and Other. Poe's final mirror scene demonstrates the impossibility of an autonomous Self by showing that the attempt to eliminate the Other results in the destruction of the Self. Poe's tale therefore challenges the idea that freedom means complete independence from others. It is in this sense that Hegel's (1977) account of recognition is useful. It suggests that self-consciousness cannot be achieved in complete detachment from others. The Self requires another consciousness through which it can recognize itself.

Ultimately, the tale consequently complicates Sartre's formulation of the Other as a source of conflict. The Other can indeed be experienced as "hell," but Poe suggests that the absence of the Other would not necessarily produce freedom and agency. It could instead lead to the annihilation of the Self. The narrator discovers too late that the Other he experiences as hell is also the Other through whom his identity has been sustained. Significantly, the existence of the double makes the issue of identity impossible to understand through individuality alone. It is in this sense that Identity therefore becomes relational, echoing the Derridean approaches of identity and difference.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the light of all that has been said thus far, E.A. Poe's tale *William Wilson* remains undoubtedly a fascinating story of Alterity and the split of identity. It offers a complex philosophical and literary perspective on how the double Self and Alter ego sparked off by the paranoid Self can essentially be viewed as but the Other of the Self, thus breaking the conventional conception of the Other as an entity that exists principally outside the Self. Poe transforms the conventional opposition between Self and Other into a relationship in which the Other is ambivalent; simultaneously external and internal, rival and reflection,

threat and necessity. William Wilson, the hero, is in dialectical tension between the wicked Self and the alter ego; a conflict which led eventually to the annihilation of the Self, symbolizing the significance of the Other for the survival of the self. The present article has extended the debates on Poe's tale by conceptualizing the double as a figure of internal alterity. If the narrator attempts to establish himself as an autonomous self by excluding the Other, the latter continually becomes omnipresent. This perspective becomes significant when considered through theories of recognition and alterity.

The final mirror scene thus becomes the ultimate symbol of Poe's conception of identity. The Self sees itself only through an image that is simultaneously itself and another. The mirror does not simply confirm identity; it destabilizes and problematizes it. Poe's tale suggests that identity is never completely independent, that difference is internal to selfhood, and that the desire to eradicate the Other may ultimately lead to annihilation of the Self.

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