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Title: Stumbling on Dover Beach

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Keywords: geometry of the imagination; history; landscapes; gardens; beaches; Arcadia

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Stumbling on Dover Beach

David Ritchie¹

Abstract

This is the third in a series of essays, linked thoughts about change over time. In the space of very few years in world historical terms, English beaches and wave-like rolling hills were transformed. For centuries people turned cottages away from strong winds. Then came the impulse to face the sea, to breathe the air in and cast like anglers for awe, possibly to catch the sublime. This is an extraordinary change of mind. On Dover Beach Arnold escaped social constraints, but he feels unease about change. Ignorant armies had gathered themselves up, pulled themselves together, moved to the city, wanting to leave behind the dirt and cold and grind, the middens of peasant life. They found... new versions of the same. Some then lived to see life in the trenches of World War One. They had lawns and gardening and, eventually, all-conquering patio furniture.

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So just let me be beside the seaside!
I'll be beside myself with glee²

In 1907 John Glover-Kind wrote a musical hall song, "I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside." Why go? For cockles and the "wine lodge" and, of course, the brass bands that play, "Tiddely-om-pom-pom." There are "lots of girls," and glee. At the edge of the sea, a boundary, there's no excuse for nervousness at all, no fear of armies clashing by night, no raiders or Martello towers, no continuing need for Fort Nelson or other relics of the Napoleonic era, no ancient fear of God's wrath and the Flood. At this boundary one may skip or stand, let one's hair down, strip off and dive in. The sea had allure, the beach too.

Why say any of that? It was not always thus. The opening sequence of the first episode of

Monty Python's Flying Circus and Matthew Arnold's, "Dover Beach" do not differ in point of view; we stand on a beach on the south coast of England, gazing out over tranquil waters. This *seems* different from, for example, noting a lone figure with his back turned--what Germans called the *rückenfigur*-- in Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea" (c. 1809) or "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" (1818). Not so though. The nineteenth century figures distrust water, know its potential for harm. Which may contribute to what makes the ragged man in Monty Python funny, a shipwrecked figure emerging from the water to gasp out one single, raspy, possibly final word, the end at the beginning, a suggestion that something of great import may follow, "It's..."

And then John Cleese breezily saying, "Monty Python's Flying Circus." There's a

¹ PNCA/ Willamette University.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Do_Like_to_Be_Beside_the_Seaside.

transition from slight fear, frisson if you wish, to glee.

In Werner Herzog's film about Bruce Chatwin, the subject of Chatwin's search for the sublime comes up briefly.³ But Herzog's concern is not fear or awe but revelation, "The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot." It's true that the Enlightenment and the age of machines brought on a questioning of systems of belief and value. And yes, confronting Nature alone and in a wild or uncertain place—the footing at Dover is slippery and rough—was likely to bring on a mix of fear and awe just as Burke said it would, but to walk alone on a beach in day or night, to stand alone above the clouds, or think of yourself as a cloud, was daring in the age before central heating and general warming; you could catch your death of cold while waiting for large or small revelation, for the universe to swirl and do what it did to Sartre's hero. The bonds that had sustained you in the primate troupe that was village life, small town life, were gone. Is and ought shifted like a light wall at the end of a kaleidoscope. As my tutor as Sussex observed, an outbreak of solipsistic fear developed.⁴

Brief history of mankind. After we came down from trees and then leaked away from the nomadic lives that so engaged Chatwin and Herzog, we invented castle walls, then fences, romantic flower borders and picky eaters. The development of popular understanding that we live on a sphere should not be confused with nonsense about people believing they would fall off the edge of the earth. People knew the surface was curved, lived with curves in their mental geometry. What engages me is why, for example, when designers gave up

the squares and rectangles we associate with French and Italian gardens in favor of curves, people say these, "mimicked Nature." As if squares and circles were unknown beyond the artifice of courts and monasteries. Both kinds of shape are in nature; both survived in design. Compare the grounds of Versailles to Chatsworth or some other large English house with a hermit's hut in the distance, designed to carry the eye from here to there, to pull you out. And hills and swales, gentle in their curves, seduce like giant Venuses. It is as if the ocean invaded the land like a Viking in the night, and instead of erasing or eroding slowly, taking plunder and leaving, it decided to settle and impose a change of mind. Gardens shaped as if by a flood were planted with imperial plunder—flowers and shrubs brought back from exploring expeditions and attempts to establish the size and shape of the earth, to track the transit of Venus. By the time the Twentieth century's giant wars rolled around these new forms had become sacred, *our* land and heritage, from the cliffs at one edge to shining sea on t'other. No longer were we people of vale or hamlet; peasants, as that wonderful book title goes, had been made into Frenchmen, and the country itself was a fortress with borders in need of defences.⁵ Like sheep become proud of what keeps us in, we marched off to war, and were slaughtered in previously unimaginable numbers. It was a great shock. Modernism began with stumble and stagger. How did we arrive at this juncture, where fear and awe were bathed with mud?

The answer may lie in the proposed cure. Between the First World War and the Second great numbers of people turned, as a title puts it, *To Nature in Germany: hiking, nudism and con-*

³ *Nomad: In the Footsteps of Bruce Chatwin*, directed by Werner Herzog (2019).

⁴ A. D. Nuttall, *A Common Sky; Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

⁵ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

ervation, 1900–1940.⁶ Not only in Germany, of course. Elsewhere people agreed that the best antidote to industrial life and stress would be to do what everyone had had to do before the invention of railways and automobiles: go for a walk, either at home or abroad, ride the undulations and the downs, breathe the sea air. Ignorant armies clashed by night, so in peace we access the uplands. We breathe. We turn our backs. We stand and stare as an antidote. But the passage from nineteenth century views of nature to twentieth century embrace of and re-imagining of same. . . well it takes a little describing.

A contemporary author imagines two soldiers talking to one another while waiting for a fight to break out in Portugal during the wars of Napoleon.

“Have you never been up here?” Sharpe asked.

“I grew up in Donegal,” Harper said, “and there was one thing we learned there, which was never go to the top of a hill.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because anything valuable will have long rolled down, sir, and all you’ll be doing is getting yourself out of breath by climbing to find it gone. Jesus Christ, but you can see halfway to heaven from up here.”⁷

And here is the same author commenting on how the ocean was perceived. “Those seas were monstrously long, looking like great smooth hills that ran silent and green toward the enemy.”⁸

Swell, the verb, to grow bigger, comes from Old English, with links to Old Saxon, Old Norse, Old Frisian. Since the fourteenth century it has been used to describe climaxes in emotions, but only in the eighteenth century

was this meaning extended to music. Swell, the noun, began as a reference to morbidity. The use here, a description of the sea, comes from the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that a wealthy or puffed-up person was described as a swell. A swale, a low or boggy place, also comes from Old Norse and was kept alive in East Anglia and Scotland before gaining wide use in the U.S. The Old Norse was svalr, meaning cool. The Old Norse root of swell was svella. A high and a low point can sound confusingly close in English.

Winston Churchill wrote a short volume titled, *Painting as a Pastime*. The argument surprises students who think of Churchill as a stick figure imperialist, a caricature either of the right or the left. His idea is that painters should value and enjoy the process, sitting still, looking carefully, finding a way to express what is before them. To contemplate Mount Fuji or a great wave or Mont Sainte-Victoire is to attempt to understand by being still and looking just as, one might argue, staring at Victorine Meurent, Edward Manet’s famous model, caused one to come to terms with different form, and oneself. Olympia, Olympus, what the diff? Well, one of them stares back.⁹ Looking at the blackness of the mountain on Moorea while thinking about colonialism and the male gaze and, of course, Gauguin, brought me to thoughts about how on the one hand the nineteenth century European view of nature was that it needed to be tamed, investigated, penetrated like a cave, a dark continent, a vagina, and on the other that it was the home of some stirring wildness that needed to be embraced as an antidote to city living and dark, satanic mills. These are not new or original

⁶ John Alexander Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: hiking, nudism, and conservation, 1900–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Bernard Cornwell, *Sharpe’s Havoc* (New York: Perennial, 2004), 103.

⁸ Bernard Cornwell, *Sharpe’s Trafalgar* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 214.

⁹ Here I nod toward one of my favorite books, Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

thoughts. Many have written about landscape and history. Nor am I new to the subject; a long time ago I spent a brief period thinking of myself (with amusement) as America's foremost authority on the history of the lawn. I gave talks on the subject. Like this:

Lawns. I'm watching the second scene in a Canadian production of "Arcadia," Tom Stoppard's play about landscape gardening, chaos theory and Bernard Nightingale, a byronic professor--he both studies and apes Byron. In this scene Nightingale is calling himself "Peacock" because he published a rude review of a book by Hannah Jarvis the historian of gardens with whom he shares the stage and he doesn't want to be found out. He makes light conversation about the lawn of the large country house they're visiting. She says she has been in the ha-ha, the barrier that keeps animals off the lawn. He responds, "Ha-ha" and launches into a professorial disquisition about how "ha-ha" ought to be pronounced and what it means in French and in the most oafish manner ends up insulting both her and a good deal of womanhood. There's a long silence. And then Hannah says, very formally, very politely, like an aristocrat putting a peasant in his place, "Mr. Peacock, what can I do for you?"

So, polite behavior triumphing over clumsiness at the edge of a lawn. Peacock strutting and rutting and being put down. I hope that by the end here you will see this scene in a new light. I, alas, got caught up in the implications of Stoppard's choice to make a red brick professor seem like an idiot. Stoppard seemed to me to be on the verge of becoming the beadle in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, positioning himself to keep upstarts and the unwashed off the scholars' grass. Having attended Sussex as an undergraduate, I think I was taking things a little too personally. But, as you'll see, my history of involvement with lawns is a history of, well, turf battles.

That history begins at the end of the last decade, about the time when Stoppard must

have been thinking about writing the play. Back then I was a normal sort of a person, a young assistant professor in a small art college, getting on with getting on, until one day I happened upon an old scythe at an estate sale. Finding it beautiful, I bought the thing and hung it on the front wall of our garage. Not more than a day later, one of our neighbors appeared on the doorstep. We live in a 1950s era tract and he, like most of the older people in the area is of that ilk of folk for whom the chief aesthetic virtue, inside and outside a house, is tidiness. He had come to warn me, he said, that if I left the scythe on my garage someone would surely steal it. "Is it really that kind of neighborhood?" I asked. And he said, "Nowadays people steal anything."

Years passed. The incident faded. In rain and shine my scythe hung where I had put it, unmolested. I did as much gardening as being the father of two children allowed. (My grandfather was a great gardener; I'm an intermittent one.) But I think my garden was well on the way towards good soil and a rather pleasing lightly-restrained wildness when I got a rude anonymous letter from "a concerned neighbor." It explained how I was letting the neighborhood down with my messy, messy garden and suggested that, like everyone else, I should employ a lawn service.

There was a loud revolving in ancestral graves. A lawn service? Pay someone good money to cut the grass? Ritchies past have un-sheathed edged weapons at lesser provocations. Naturally my thoughts quickly turned to art, the art of revenge. A friend suggested hanging giant pieces of messy "washing" on a line between the two trees growing in my front lawn. But I found myself imagining a huge pedestal and on it a glowing white lawn mower. It was to be an ironic heroic sculpture, a Victorian form manipulated to represent what I took to be a contemporary inheritance from nineteenth century mores-- the perfect lawn as indicator of moral rectitude or economic suc-

cess or both, the lawn as sign that you number among the elect.

Even though another friend donated an old mower, I didn't make the piece. But while I was mulling the idea over, it struck me that I really had no sense of how lawns came about or why everyone seems to have one. From being things that were so familiar they weren't noticed, lawns suddenly became in my mind rather weird. I began to doubt that I could even define one: those grassy bits, viridian strips of coarse sod, laid like dry moats around condominium complexes and mirrored office buildings in desert Southern California. Or, the unsprinklered, flat-rolled, diagonally striped, rear, fenced, daisy-scattered, private thing of pride that my parents in suburban London are so fond of eating out on. Or, huge rolling acres of monied greenery surrounding English country houses. Or, the carpet-like symmetrical things hedged in by gravel walks outside French chateaux. Or, the little middle bits of "keep off" in Oxbridge colleges and ruined castles. Or, in places where snakes are a problem, the cleared areas that keep reptiles away from the house by making them visible to predators. Or my own frontal and rear child-and-dog exercise zones. I was puzzled by this variety, so I decided to do research.

I began with the dictionary. According to the O.E.D. there are at least three sources for our contemporary understanding of the term "lawn": a lawn was where fox hunters gathered for a stirrup cup; a lawn was a broad-leafed weed-infested field that, in crop rotation, was left fallow; lawn was a smooth linen, worn by Bishops. So we already have in the etymology hints of contemporary conflicts about what a lawn should be--a gathering place for the upwardly mobile, a restful weedy place, a holy thing! I looked forward eagerly to discovering what experts had to say on the topic.

It turns out that lawn history is something of a... wide open field. The best book on the subject is, as far as I know, the only book de-

voted exclusively to the subject, Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*. It tells the largely twentieth century American part of the story. But as for the rest? In approximately three hundred years of gardening books, lawns have a role something like that of Victorian children--they're in some of the pictures, but no one seems to want to talk about them. Robert Morris' early eighteenth century, *Elements of Modern Gardening* is quite typical. The lawn, said Morris, should be tidy and free from clumps. You should keep heavy cattle off it in wet weather. It should have trees on the sides or about the pathway and it should be apparently without boundaries. Its job is to take the eye from here to there. Humphrey Repton's *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* in 1816 has 26 chapters: How to do water, how to do windows, how to do castles and so on. The only entry on lawns comes in a section on how to make gardens accessible to the infirm. Invalids in wheelchairs, he says, may prefer grass communications to gravel ones. Well, quite.

One contemporary author [whose name I now can't find] implied that Thomas Jefferson invented the modern lawn. He suggested that Jefferson's admiration for French hospitals and his taking to heart Scottish comments about the physical and moral health of students being better preserved away from town, stirred in with ideas about vistas to the unbounded west and taming the wilderness' edge, all of this stew caused Jefferson to invent a new form of lawn, the campus lawn at the University of Virginia. But Jefferson's sketches identify the area in question, not as the capitalized thing the U of V now reverentially calls "The Lawn," but merely as "grass." Though the word lawn was certainly available to Jefferson and his contemporaries, they did not always use it.

In all of this, the invention of the lawn mower seems key. Without a mower, the lawn could only be a more or less well-tamed field. What do historians of technology say

about the giant leap for mankind that the mechanical mower represents? Not a thing! Not one of the eight volumes in the Oxford History of Technology, for example, displays a jot of interest in the lawn mower. Here's the scoop. In 1830 Edward Beard Budding and John Ferrabee came up with a machine with which two people or a horse and one person could crop or shear "the vegetable surface of," (these are his terms) "lawns, grass plots or pleasure grounds." Clearly, though there may have been some overlap, these terms were not synonymous. The machine was in two senses a slow hit. In 1841 Mrs Loudon's *Ladies' Companion to the Flower Garden* indicated that "a substitute for mowing with the scythe has lately been introduced in the form of a mowing machine... It is particularly adapted for amateurs, affording an excellent exercise to the arms and every part of the body; but it is proper to observe that many gardeners are prejudiced against it." These prejudices probably didn't fade quickly, but modifications to the design and a rapid rise in the number of gardeners eventually brought success. How rapid was this rise? How much was gardening the passion of Imperial Britons? In 1841 when that most Imperial of plunder stores Kew Gardens opened, it was visited by people in the tens of thousands. By 1851 the annual visits were up to almost 328,000. In 1880 one million people visited Kew and in 1907 the number had risen to almost three million visitors out of a population of about 45 million people. Gardening as my grandfather knew it, had arrived.

The Victorian period thus seems critical in the history of the lawn, which may now be crudely sketched as follows. The skirmish that Tom Stoppard was dramatizing in *Arcadia* between the Capability Brownite English "naturalists" who wanted to maintain the carrying-the-eye-from-here-to-there vistas sort of a lawn, with wilderness and heavy cattle away at the edge, and the newer folk, the Reptonites who don't seem to have seen the lawn as much

more than a foreground for hermit's huts and other quaint thrills, this skirmish was something of a dialectic. Neither side triumphed absolutely; the lawn that emerged was a synthesis of both forces. It had undulations, ha-ha's, carpets of daisies, indications to suggest grassy wilderness or mountain meadow. It was nature manipulated like paint and left to mature, the expansion of an Englishman's home into a less and less threatening outside, but a person could still see who or what was coming. When this lawn's new antithesis emerged there was a tougher struggle, for the antithesis was created by people who thought that the essence of both civilization and the lawn was discipline, conquest and restraint. These were the Imperial Victorians who, when dealing with primitive nature and natures, slowly developed preferences for the lawn mower over the scythe and the machine gun over the rifle. Today's lawns are distant descendants of the struggle between these two forces --wildness merely manipulated and nature subjected to colonial discipline.

It is Alain Corbin's contention that the seaside was "discovered" between 1750 and 1840, by which he means that some number of people living in Western Europe overcame their fears and hostility towards the sea during that period and quite suddenly began to invest the experience of being beside and in the sea with health-giving properties. It was, to adapt Corbin's original phrasing, a collective psychic leap into waters that had long been regarded as remnants of the Biblical flood and therefore fraught with moral and physical dangers. The leap, Corbin explained, was made by developing rituals of decorous and therefore pacifying behavior. Women, in particular, had to be chaperoned and were held in the water by qualified swimming attendants for fear that the encounter with wildness might carry them off to wherever it was that women who got carried away went. Shades of *A Passage to India*.

I can only raise the possibility that concerns

and behaviors of grass-tamers between say 1860 and 1914 seem to be related to the concerns and behaviors of Corbin's eighteenth-century sea-tamers, and indeed of other nineteenth century tamers of things foreign, wild or unknown. I think that these imperial endeavors are all cut from the same behavioral cloth. The very Tom Wolfe-ian question beside the seaside at Brighton, or in the hot sun of India, or on the lawn was the same, "What does one wear to a conquest?" And the answer was, almost always, "White."

If you have come with me this far you may agree now that my scythe's threat to our neighborhood was not merely the obvious references to revolution or to death. It must have been read, I think, as a refusal to keep my grass tame, to keep my trousers white, to keep things clean and tidy. It was read as a token of greater wildness to come. And indeed, my neighbor was absolutely prescient; before I knew consciously that I wanted to, I found myself painting a mural on my garage doors. It's a representation of wild mountains and green seas!

Contemporary lawns are interesting emptinesses, the garden's equivalent of negative space, not one thing at all, but the inheritance of a history which is at least dialectic, and which may have a more complex, chaotic pattern to it. In some places the lawn still carries the eye or invalid from here to there like some kind of carpet. In other places, or in the anti-pesticide debate it is asked to be a particular kind of romantic nature: an alpine meadow or a fallow field. Sometimes it's a play space. The disciplined lawn is widely regarded as an indicator of upward mobility, a place where one imagines fox hunters, bishops, Oxbridge scholars or golfers could gather. The undisciplined lawn is associated with working class stagnation. Consider the possibility at least that even in democratic America, the lawn is a reli-

quary of Imperial urges, a conquered seaside strip fringed by seaside lounge chairs that has hints of faded memory, of aging grandeur; the decorously-behaving white-trousered croquet suitors have long since departed. Today that cleared area, that lawn, has become a field of fire, a barrier between us and them, or IT; kept empty, kept tidy, kept off.

Wagons crossing the great grasslands of America on their way west, were called prairie schooners. Like trading ships acting as scouts for Imperial armies, they were crossing a grass sea, carrying civilization, lawns and discipline to the Oregon country so that the fruit of their loins could plant and grow in the Willamette Valley much of America's lawn seed and turf, could pursue health, happiness and a ranch style tract home, could study the tense, the perplexing, the difficult art of being a good neighbor.

One of the authors of a history of the beach says in the introduction to that volume, "On his deathbed... my great-uncle... was reputed to have said: 'There are three phases of life, birth, *beach*, and death.'... the beach has remained enshrined and unchallenged as a site of spiritual renewal, regeneration, and the stockpiling of sun-warmed memories... that... sustain... through hard times and the winters of the soul."¹⁰ The authors are fully aware of the violence of the sea, "violence is the modus operandi of water, accommodation is the way of the land."¹¹ But it was not simply water that made the beach dangerous. In *Albion's Seed*, we are reminded, "For more than a thousand years, sea raiders had fallen upon the English Coast, and the memory of their depredations was very much alive in 1630. In that year, at least two towns in Essex... still had nailed to their church doors the human skins of marauding Danes who had been flayed alive by their intended victims. Raiders from the sea had attacked East Anglia as recently as 1626 and 1627

¹⁰ Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *The Beach; The History of Paradise on Earth* (New York: Viking, 1998), xix.

¹¹ Lenček and Bosker, 14.

when the dreaded ‘Dunkirkers’ came ashore—killing, looting and raping as so many other sea people had done before.”¹² Matthew Arnold stood on Dover Beach between the two eras described, the era of terrifying transit of men and that of the halcyon strand. And what was true of the beach was also true of mountains and forests. In the space of very few years in world historical terms, these places were transformed; where one walked in fear there was now the possibility of awe or joy, even rapture. This is an extraordinary change of mind.

What did we like to be beside and why? Did all boundaries make us nervous, or just some? And why would we treat this nervousness by drawing up chaise lounges or deck chairs and wielding hedge clippers? The man on Dover Beach is neither walking nor hurrying at anyone’s command, which were the constants of peasant life. He’s noticing what it is to be alone, breaking away both from the social constraints of village life and the crowds and freedom of the new cities. In the early nineteenth century in increasing numbers people were gathering themselves up, pulling themselves together, moving to the city, leading lives with clutter in them, while aspiring to leave behind dirt and mess and cold and grind. And there developed the suggestion that mountains and seas, grass and nature could be conquered, subdued; they were neither as dangerous nor as overwhelming as people once thought. Scottish highlanders who had seemed so frightening in 1745 and 46 became worthy of imitation, in dress at least. People adopted nature’s curves in gardens, demonstrated that with the aid of machines the landscape could be re-formed, disciplined, cropped short.

We still go to the edge of the sea to sit, bathe, walk up and down, stumble on rocks, slip on seaweed. On a cliff near Polzeath, high over the Atlantic, there is a plaque commemorat-

ing the spot where Laurence Binyon decided death was “august and royal,” and recorded that thought in “For the Fallen.” Today’s sea has many aspects. On the cover of John Le Carré’s *Silverview*, recently and posthumously published, but written nearly a decade ago, two figures haunt a shoreline. Why haunt? They are silhouettes and because you can’t see their feet they don’t seem in contact with the ground. Possibly they are photo-shopped. They ignore the sea, the rocks, the shore. Their eyes are on buildings, towers, a town on the horizon, towards which they walk, we know not why.

In the foreground the sea crashes and sprays. Schemes and intrigue, moral ambivalence, the world after armies have clashed, that’s what is being illustrated here. We have built sea walls. Before General Robert engineered some of these, he wrote the Rules of Order. If, as we stand and look at swells, we imagine these two figures, and those mentioned at the outset, we may see some history and understand how apt was the choice to set the movie “Oh What a Lovely War” in Brighton. Above a slippery, stony strand and lapping waters, the performance in that movie re-shaped understanding, and may even have sent curious people to the dictionary to look up the history of the word ‘slapstick.’¹³ A subject for another time and place.

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¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slapstick>.

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