

GENRE-BENDING IN *THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT*

J A S O N M O S S E R

IN *THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT*, Norman Mailer recreates his participation in an anti-Vietnam War march that took place in Washington D.C. in October, 1967. Mailer subtitles Book/Part One *History as a Novel*, and Book/Part Two *the Novel as History*, but he ultimately begs the questions, what part is which, and which part is what? Are both parts both? Kathy Smith astutely observes that the “as” in Mailer’s subtitles, “History as a Novel” and “the Novel as History,” “denotes a metaphorical relationship between history and fiction, implying not only that history is *like* fiction, and vice versa, but that one always contains the other.... Mailer uses ‘as’ to complicate the terms, allowing them to merge into one another” (191). How does Mailer define the terms novel and history in the context of his literary journalism? Literary journalism is certainly the only generic label that completely fits. Further, if we take the text to be a work of New Journalism, then what part is journalism, as opposed to what parts are fiction and history, and how do we distinguish among the genres? Mailer bends all three to suit his purposes.

In an article citing and synthesizing Mailer’s many pronouncements on the distinctions among narrative forms, J. Michael Lennon concludes that Mailer sees:

[A] fundamental dichotomy between the novel and all forms of narrative nonfiction, history and journalism especially. For Mailer the novel is spontaneous, resonant and intended to illuminate questions. History and journalism are pre-digested, concrete and intended to provide answers to questions they raise. Novels are open, immediate, and overbearing; they intensify con-

sciousness and difficulties of moral choice. History and journalism are lucid and organized; their outcomes are usually predetermined by selected evidence; they deliver buttressed conclusions. In the novel everything is slightly murky, swirling, and when meaning does emerge, it does so in a flash of brilliant intuition. Conversely, history and journalism are courts where evidence is presented systematically; at the end of the trial, the accretion of linked fact is overwhelming and indisputable. Fiction for Mailer is “the high road,” and its plots are complex and usually open-ended. History and journalism are the low road and their plots are ordered and predictable. Time in the novel accelerates and then dawdles; it moves at no certain speed. In history and journalism, time has been bought and labeled; time has already been consumed. (97)

Lennon’s summary faithfully represents Mailer’s own distinctions. The question is whether Mailer’s critical principles are consistent with his practice as a writer. A related question: when Mailer references history and journalism, is he talking about what he considers standard historiographic and journalistic practice or his own? The dichotomy that Lennon brings to light suggests that Mailer conceives of history and journalism as those forms are traditionally understood, but when we look closely at *Armies*, a work of New Journalism, we can see that the text embodies many of the qualities Mailer associates with fiction. First, Mailer’s heuristic, improvisational style gives to *Armies* the sense of spontaneity he associates with his preferred form, the novel. Further, Mailer’s focus on his own perceptions and impressions does at times intensify the reader’s consciousness in sympathetic union with the narrator’s, and some of the more deliberative passages, such as the “Why Are We in Vietnam?” chapter, present the reader with the difficult moral choices such as how to end the war in Vietnam without creating even greater instability in southeast Asia. Finally, the form of *Armies* is ultimately open-ended, ambiguous, and suggestive, qualities Mailer again associates with fiction; his metaphorical final chapter illumines questions about the future of the embattled Republic without drawing definitive conclusions.

One way to bridge the gap between or among the genres is to borrow Kenneth Burke’s metaphor of history as drama, to read Mailer’s text as a dramatic conflict in which Mailer, playing the role of protagonist, dramatizes

the political struggle between the right-wing establishment and the left-wing anti-establishment over the war in Vietnam. Mailer's distinction between the methods adopted by historians and journalists and his own novelistic method is similar to the distinction Burke makes between the "semantic" and "poetic" ideals in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, (138–164). Traditionally, historians and journalists, striving to achieve the "semantic" ideal, stress the role of the observer, attempting, according to Burke, "to get a description [of an event] by the elimination of an attitude ... to cut away, to abstract, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning" (147–8). Mailer, adhering to the "poetic" ideal, stresses the role of the participant and, indeed, he refers to himself as "the Participant" in the text. Mailer's primary concern is with preparing a dramatically persuasive image which will invite the audience's symbolic participation in the historical struggle. Through a dramatic, "poetic" presentation of events, Mailer appeals to his readers to give their assent to his subjective observations, reactions, and analyses. His emotional involvement in the March and his commitment to radical causes—however qualified—set him apart from other journalists and historians. According to Burke, literary artists like Mailer, striving to achieve the "poetic" ideal:

[W]ould attempt to attain a full moral act by attaining a perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude ... to derive its vision from the maximum *heaping up* of all these emotional factors, playing them off against one another, inviting them to reinforce and contradict one another, and seeking to make this active participation itself a major ingredient of the vision. (148)

Mailer attempts to foreground as many "conflicts of attitude" into his text as possible as he dramatizes a process in which competing discourses engage each other dialectically. In Bakhtinian terms, *Armies* is a "heteroglossic" text: "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (Bakhtin 324). By incorporating the language of others into his own text, Mailer plays the various voices off one another dialectically, multiplying perspectives so that no particular ideological viewpoint, other than Mailer's idiosyncratic own, is privileged over the others, yet even Mailer, in the wake of the event, refuses to draw definitive conclusions about the significance and outcome of the march on the Pentagon (Mailer 236).

Dramatically and dialectically, *Armies* resists closure; the historic conflicts it develops remain unresolved.

Mailer's subjectivity and personal involvement in the demonstration allow him a closer perspective than an historical account, based on secondary research (newspaper reports, interviews, etc.), can achieve. Mailer's extended "Novel Metaphor," which introduces Book Two, makes the point:

[I]f you would see the horizon from a forest, you must build a tower. If the horizon will reveal most of what is significant, an hour of examination can yet do the job—it is the tower which takes months to build. So the Novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study—at the greatest advantage—our own horizon. Of course, the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped, but the instruments of all sciences—history so much as physics—are always constructed in small or large error; what supports the use of them now is that our intimacy with the master builder of the tower, and the lens grinder of the telescopes (yes, even the machinist of the barrels) has given some advantage for correcting the error of the instruments and the imbalance of his tower. May that be claimed of many histories? In fact, how many novels can be put so quickly to use? (For the novel—we will permit ourselves this parenthesis—is, when it is good, the personification of a vision which will enable one to comprehend the other visions better; a microscope—if one is exploring the pond; a telescope upon a tower if you are scrutinizing the forest.)

The method is then exposed. The mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an historian; our novel has provided us with the possibility, no, even the instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light a labor of lens-grinding has produced. (243–4)

Mailer's extended metaphor contains three parts: the horizon represents the demonstration activities themselves, the forest represents the biased and

distorted accounts provided to the American public by the corporate media; the tower, telescope, and microscope represent Mailer's own consciousness and by extension his text which allow the reader to view the horizon over the forest. Mailer's insistence that one must "build" the tower emphasizes that the text is something shaped or made by the writer's own personality. The tower, telescope, and microscope, then, come to stand not only for Mailer's text, but for the reporter himself. By pointing out that "the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped," Mailer acknowledges the imperfection or subjectivity of his vision. Mailer's admission that his perceptual apparatus are imperfect is a rhetorical consideration; paradoxically, Mailer protects himself from charges of personal bias by openly admitting his biases. Then, as Stanly T. Gutman says, "the reader can easily become aware of the biases and weaknesses of Mailer's vision and thus compensate for them" (162). Mailer's claim that the "instruments of all sciences—history so much as physics—are always constructed in small or large error," based on the discovery of modern physics that even scientific observation factors in some degree of relativity, further corrects the "error" and "imbalance" of his perceptual instruments by calling attention to them. Once the reader understands that the writer's perspective is determined by his personality and ideological biases (frankly acknowledged, if not foregrounded, throughout the text), the reader may calculate those factors into an understanding of both text and event. Mailer's subjectivity also frees him from the obligation, shared by many journalists and historians, to appear objective and disinterested; he can then dramatize the event as he chooses. The corporate news media cannot share Mailer's candor about the role they play in shaping events, for it is in their interest to appear disinterested; the pretense of objectivity, as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky point out in *Manufacturing Consent*, allowed the mass media in the U.S. to run an effective propaganda campaign in support of the Vietnam war (1).

Mailer's tower metaphor suggests that the primary distinction between history and fiction exists in the realm of experience: the historian writes his account after the fact, basing his narrative on research, assimilating other accounts, direct or indirect, into his own text; the novelist, by contrast, at least in Mailer's case, writes from direct experience. One key difference, then, between history and journalism, on the one hand, fiction or new journalism on the other, is that conventional historical or journalistic accounts tend to regard significant events as exterior, residing in the realm of

empirically verifiable facts, while fictional or new journalistic texts take interior factors, the writer's private thoughts or emotions, for example, into consideration. Philip Bufithis draws the following distinction between fiction and history in *Armies*: "The book is novelistic because it sensitively describes the *effects* of the march on a participant-protagonist, Norman Mailer, and historical because it scrupulously describes the *fact* of the march" (86). Mailer says that

the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historical inquiry. (281)

History, Mailer says, is "interior" (281), indicating that history is a lived experience, not a compilation of data which bear a purely external relation to the individuals involved. *Armies* contains a multitude of facts about the anti-war demonstration, but Mailer's primary concern is with the feel of the event, the emotional factors that cannot necessarily be conveyed by the conventional five Ws approach—Who, What, When, Where and Why.

By referring to himself in *Armies* in the third person, as "Mailer," the narrator not only situates himself as protagonist; he also creates a certain distance, sometimes ironic, sometimes ambiguous, between himself and his experience. At the same time, as Laura Adams suggests, Mailer seems to believe that "journalists and historians are incapable of handling the ambiguous" (130). Ambiguity suggests an ability to entertain multiple perspectives, a negative capability, in Romantic terms, as well as a sensitivity to nuance and connotation. Exploring that ambiguity, Mailer asks of his persona: "is he finally comic, a ludicrous figure with mock-heroic associations; or is he not unheroic, and therefore embedded somewhat tragically in the comic? Or is he both at once, and all at once?" (65). He goes on to suggest that there may be no answers to these questions, just as the ambiguity of the event itself may never be resolved. Kathy Smith argues that in *Armies* "the self's preemption of the story, the self *as* story, is the only strategy that can precipitate a radical rethinking of how history provides cohesive explanations of ambiguous events" (187). Mailer indeed suggests that history is an ambiguous and dynamic process, not static. The significance of events, therefore, must

continually be reassessed, and from as many points of view as possible. If he conceives of contemporary history as fundamentally ambiguous, even absurd, his role as participant is similarly ambiguous and absurd, in Mailer's view.

Mailer's conception of history and his own role in the historical drama overlap. John Hellmann observes that Mailer "casts himself as a protagonist able to bridge self and event through action and metaphor" (37). Indeed, one of the text's central metaphors compares history to a "crazy house" that the reader gains entrance to via Mailer's persona as "bridge" (Mailer 66). Mailer says that

if the event took place in one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the* crazy house of history, it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such a history should be not only off very much to the side of the history, but that he should be an egotist of the most startling misproportions ... yet in command of a detachment classic in severity ... Such egotism being two-headed, thrusting itself forward the better to study itself, finds itself therefore at home in a house of mirrors ... Once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History. (66)

Mailer's metaphor is appropriate to his method. The "crazy house," typically found in an amusement park, is constructed in this case of events that seem to defy conventional historical or journalistic methods for making sense of experience. In a "crazy house," one's senses become disoriented, and nothing is necessarily what it seems. The sense of distortion and disorientation is augmented by mass media accounts and by dogmatic political discourse on the left and right. Mailer's "crazy house" metaphor implies that, given the confusion and baffling complexity of events, it would be unethical, if not simply inaccurate, for the writer to omit that element of disorientation or craziness from his text. Despite the protagonist's egotism, then, a perspective "off to the side" deemphasizes the centrality of the writer's position in the midst of the event. To report truthfully on an ambiguous event requires a central consciousness that is not only ambiguous but somewhat detached: "an eyewitness who is a participant but not a vested partisan is required" (65), Mailer says. At the same time, "egotism" implies subjectivity, the necessity to seek the truth of the event within one's own experience; this

“truth” can only be discovered within a “house of mirrors,” where the writer may examine his experience by seeing his reaction to diverse phenomena reflected back for examination.

One element of the text’s dramatic structure results from the fact—often referred to by Mailer—that the march had no “center” (20): no individual or group of individuals was completely in charge; no definite route had been decided upon in advance. Mailer’s direct participation in an unpredictable and uncertain event points to an important difference between his account and other, more straightforward historical accounts which, he says, “can assume that certain ... dramatic issues were never in doubt” (273). Mailer incorporates his uncertainty, anxiety and fear into the text heuristically, determining the text’s structure in the act of writing. As Gutman remarks, the writing of *Armies* represents “a search for meaning,” one that has “no known end but only a guideline for its investigation,” to seek the meaning of the experience in the experience itself (167). Indeed, the uncertainty of the outcome feeds Mailer’s appetite for the existential moment: “we are up, face this, all of you,” he tells the crowd assembled at the Ambassador Theater, “against an existential situation—we do not know how it is going to turn out, and what is even more inspiring of dread is that the government doesn’t know either” (Mailer 48). The “dread” produced by existential uncertainty raises a dramatic question Mailer asks repeatedly throughout the text: will the march result in violence? The fear of a violent response on behalf of the police or military creates some of the text’s dramatic tension.

Many critics writing on *Armies* have found Book One more interesting than Book Two. Alan Trachtenburg asserts that “Taken by itself, Book Two is not nearly so persuasive or compelling a piece of writing as the earlier part, from which it takes its aesthetic justification as counterpart. It seems too much a muted coda, adding information but not really extending insight and feeling beyond Book One” (701). Bufithis also maintains that there is a stylistic difference between Books One and Two:

When Mailer departs from his novelistic rendering of material, the book loses its thrust. The narrative-descriptive style, in which explicit details triumphantly cohere with implicit moral movements, gives way to the oracular-ruminative style which dotes on abstractions and cultural *cum* philosophical questions. (94)

As I am attempting to show, however, the entire text dramatizes the March on the Pentagon, and Book Two is not devoid of drama. The key difference between the two books is in the degree to which Mailer actually participates in the events described. In Book One, Mailer personally witnesses everything he writes about. His direct participation accounts for the higher degree of emotional involvement; therefore, his language is more poetic, more emotionally-charged. Book Two is based much more, although not exclusively, on secondary research; the higher degree of detachment causes a corresponding decrease in emotionally-charged prose. In Book Two, Chapters 2–5 deal with the months of planning leading up to the march, including negotiations and compromises between various leftist factions and between the protestors and the U.S. government. There is little drama here. Mailer's concern is less with his own responses and impressions than with facts external to himself and gathered by way of research, precisely the method he himself associates with historiography. Mailer's lack of participation in the events related in Book Two affects his style; it becomes plain, unself-conscious, prosaic. No longer emotionally involved, Mailer's narrative voice loses its passion, its sense of conviction and engagement. There is less indictment of right- and left-wing positions, more conjecture regarding strategies of negotiation. The narrator continues to analyze events, but the analysis becomes less philosophical, less metaphorical.

However, if the opening chapters of Book Two are less self-consciously dramatic than Book One—both in terms of the nature of the events described and the narrator's reaction to those events—Book Two, Chapter 6 quickens the dramatic pace. All of the events related up to this point lead to the principal confrontation between demonstrators and U.S. troops in front of the Pentagon. Mailer begins Book Two, Chapter 6 with the following assertion: "It is on this particular confrontation that the conceit one is writing a history must be relinquished" (280). He explains that if "the first book is a history in the guise or dress or manifest of a novel ... the second is a real or true novel ... presented in the style of a history," thus blurring the distinction between the two forms of writing (281). Nevertheless, *Armies* does, indeed, become more novelistic from this point on: the narrative drive shifts into a higher gear, and Mailer's imagination goes to work. The narrator is then able to dramatize certain details of the action not because he personally witnessed them, having by this point been arrested and incarcerated, but because his participation in the march up

to the arrest was sufficient to enable him to recreate the mood of the proceedings.

Book Two introduces a new dramatic conflict: in Book Two, Chapter 6, the confrontation between troops and demonstrators becomes, in part, a political struggle between working class and urban middle class youth. This conflict comes as a surprise, as Mailer notes: "It would take the rebirth of Marx for Marxism to explain definitively this middle class condemnation of an imperialist war in the last Capitalist nation, this working class affirmation" (284). The narrator muses on this apparent contradiction, reasoning that the students own neither property nor the means of production and so are cut off from the real source of power, and yet their education has provided them with the critical framework to reflect upon their own powerlessness and alienation; they are, therefore, the most critical of their government's policies. The working class, by contrast, "is loyal to friends, not ideas," so alienation is less likely (284). "No wonder the Army bothered them not a bit," Mailer says (284). The working class has the authority and the guns, but the urban middle class feels it has the moral advantage. Mailer imaginatively recreates the message the urban middle class youth brings to the troops: "I am morally right and you are wrong and the balance of existence is such that the meat of your life is now attached to my spirit. I am stealing your balls" (285). Later, however, in a dramatic reversal, the antagonistic forces of the U.S. Military reassert their dominance. After dark, when many of the protestors have left the grounds of the Pentagon, the Military rotates its forces; the troops form a wedge and begin moving through the crowd to separate it, kicking and clubbing at the demonstrators. Mailer quotes several accounts of "The Battle of the Wedge" which describe the violence and brutality in graphic detail (299–305). Mailer points out that much of the violence was directed at women, in what he interprets as a symbolic attempt on the part of the Military to emasculate the male demonstrators; the working class youth "had plucked all stolen balls back," he says (304). Various demonstrators point out that the Military had no legal right to attack protestors acting under the protection of a permit. Mailer states that "[t]he Army had been guilty of illegal activity and knew it," appealing to the moral indignation of his readers (306).

Book Two, Chapter 10 concerns the repercussions of the march and follows up on continued protest activities. Many of the activists served extended prison sentences and were brutally mistreated for non-cooperation

with their incarcerators. In the following passage, Mailer dramatizes their experience:

Several men at the D.C. jail would not wear prison clothing. Stripped of their own, naked, they were thrown in the Hole. There they lived in cells so small that not all could lie down at once to sleep. For a day they lay naked on the floor, for many days naked with blankets and mattress on the floor. For many days they did not eat nor drink water. Dehydration brought them near to madness. (315)

Mailer uses ellipsis, the omission of a word easily understood, “Stripped of their own [clothing],” to suggest the protestors’ degradation and humiliation by the authorities. By stating that the protestors were “Stripped of their own,” he implies that they were deprived of more than clothing: their fundamental rights and dignity were also taken from them. The repetition of the phrase “for many days” emphasizes the terrible relentlessness of their punishment, and creates through its rhythmic pattern a Biblical tone, leading Mailer finally to ask about the protestors, “who was to say they were not saints?” (316). He closes this chapter by imaginatively recreating the protestors’ prayer that their suffering be accepted by God as penance for the sins of their country in Vietnam.

The final chapter of *Armies* consists of a pair of extended metaphors which capture the ominous uncertainty, the mixture of hope and dread Mailer feels in the wake of the march. These final, emotionally charged metaphors are crucial to an understanding of the text’s dramatic structure:

Whole crisis of Christianity in America that the military heroes were on one side, and the unnamed saints on the other! Let the bugle blow. The death of America rides in on the smog. America—the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people—if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn—was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea! If the locks did not turn, then the will of the people was the will of

the Devil. Who by now could know where was what? Liars controlled the locks.

Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin—it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has never known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep. (316–7)

John Hollowell interprets this final chapter as the dramatic conflict between Manichean opposites: “All of the opposed forces—totalitarianism and democracy, age and youth, technology and humanism, the Devil’s curse and God’s grace—come together on a weekend in October 1967” (100). Mailer suggests these “opposed forces” through the use of balance and antithesis, the controlling stylistic principle of the final chapter: “the military heroes were on one side, the unnamed saints on the other”; America was “once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled ... now a beauty of leprous skin”; “the will of the people—if the locks of their life could be given the will to turn—was then the will of God ... If the locks did not turn, then the will of the people was the will of the Devil.” Finally, by asking whether America will give birth to “the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known” or “a new world brave and tender, artful and wild,” Mailer personifies America as “She,” a woman about to give birth, in order to phrase a highly complex question in concrete, humanly compelling terms. To dramatize the uncertainty of the outcome, Mailer asks a series of rhetorical questions. The first question, “Who by now could know where was what?” is followed by an answer: “Liars controlled the locks.” In this instance, Mailer employs a rhetorical device called *sermocinatio* in which he answers his own question in order to express his doubt and frustration. Mailer then asks of America, “she

will probably give birth ... and to what?" This question is followed not by an answer but by more questions, compounding the dramatic tension. We see in this passage further evidence of Mailer's heuristic method, the interjection "no" suggesting a mind attempting to come to terms with the uncertainty of the moment. Closing with a series of short, quick sentences in the imperative mood, "Brood on that country that expresses our will ... Let the bugle blow ... Rush to the locks ... Deliver us from our curse," Mailer emphasizes the urgent need for direct action.

Mailer's text concludes, according to Hollowell, with the hope that good will ultimately triumph over evil (101), but Hollowell's interpretation disregards the political implications of Mailer's conclusion; instead, he sees Mailer involved in a moral struggle somewhat disengaged from historical reality. What Hollowell discusses in theological or moral terms, Stanley T. Gutman interprets dialectically:

Though [Mailer] had always believed that struggle between opposing forces is the condition of existence, he had also affirmed a need for synthesis between opposing forces to resolve, if only temporarily, the struggle at the core of all existence. What he is claiming here [in this passage quoted above] is that in contemporary America there seems little possibility of synthesis, and that the dynamics of dialectical process have deteriorated into unresolvable antithesis. Opposites may not longer be reconciled; what appears to lie ahead is the effort of each half of a divided society to destroy the other. (171)

Gutman's speculation is grim, and not altogether warranted. Mailer's metaphorical "babe of a new world brave and tender" suggests not the imminence of mutual destruction but the possibility of social and political regeneration. At the same time, when asked whether, subsequent to the March, his metaphorical child had been delivered, Mailer has replied in the negative and suggested that "[i]t gives every promise of being a monster," adding, however, that "when you're writing about a period that has not finished itself, you don't know the end, and this keeps you open" (Schroeder 104–05). In any case, as the text concludes, the dialectical opposites, freedom and totalitarianism, are still firmly locked in struggle. Warner Berthoff suggests that the "metaphors of parturition and ambiguous new birth with

which the book ends ... have the heart-sinking beauty of an entire fitness to this fearful, intimately American occasion ... it is hard not to feel that they form a climax" (327), but while Mailer's metaphors may form a climax, there is no denouement, no final resolution of the dramatic conflict, no closure. The birth Mailer prophesizes has yet to occur. Nevertheless, *Armies* does conclude on a note of hope, as Mailer urges his readers in that historical moment to "Rush to the locks," to reflect on the fact that the war in Vietnam still raged and so the battle for America's future was not yet won. Mailer exhorted his readers to believe that the curtain was not closed, and that they all still had their roles to play in the historical drama; this final chapter was perhaps their cue.

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