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Beyond the Pale: “Poesía Postpoética” in Agustín Fernández Mallo’s *Joan Fontaine Odisea*

Abstract

In a recent article defining his concept of “poesía postpoética,” Agustín Fernández Mallo chides and challenges his contemporaries for being behind the times. While not completely eschewing more traditional techniques of intertextuality and imagery, Fernández Mallo does stress the need to incorporate scientific and mathematical imagery. His book-length poem, *Joan Fontaine Odisea (mi deconstrucción)* (2005), exemplifies his “poesía postpoética” in its use of allusions to high and popular culture, and scientific concepts, along different types of discourse, to disrupt the commonplace perception of a unified poetic voice. This article will focus on *Joan Fontaine Odisea* as a modern poetic sequence that includes paratextual elements, framing devices, and images such as Dirac’s Delta function in particular, to provide readers with some preliminary strategies for reading and appreciating this work and Fernández Mallo’s “poesía postpoética.” The theoretical basis will rely on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and on a recent book by Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*.

Keywords

Agustín Fernández Mallo, poesía postpoética, Joan Fontaine Odisea, modern poetry, poetry, poetic voice, mathematics

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In all probability, the name of Agustín Fernández Mallo will be more familiar to readers as the author of a highly successful and experimental narrative trilogy, the *Proyecto Nocilla* ‘Nocilla Project’ (‘Nocilla Dream’ [2006], ‘Nocilla Experience’ [2008], and ‘Nocilla Lab’ [2009]).¹ Like many of his contemporaries, however, he is a multi-talented writer who explores the boundaries between genres and disciplines, always adopting an innovative approach. With particular regard to poetry, the writer has been highly critical of the limited and antiquated practices of many of his contemporaries. In essays defining what he calls “poesía postpoética” ‘post-poetic poetry’ he complains,

El poeta hoy parece haberse abandonado [a] la práctica de manierismos y ejercicios de nostalgia.... [U]na mayoría abrumadora de la poesía publicada ... parece no haberse enterado del cambio operado no sólo por el resto de las artes ... sino por el conjunto de lo que damos en llamar sociedades técnico-desarrolladas, y si se ha enterado le da la espalda de tal manera que sólo puede conducirla al suicidio por anoréxica autodestrucción. (“Hacia un nuevo paradigma” 118-19)

The poet today seems to have abandoned himself to the practice of mannerisms and exercises in nostalgia.... An overwhelming majority of published poetry . . . seems not to be aware of the change that has taken place in the rest of the arts . . . if not in the totality of what we call technically developed societies, and if it is aware, has turned its back in such a way that it can only lead to suicide by anorexic self-destruction.

In short, Fernández Mallo maintains that “El poeta se ha quedado atrás” (119) ‘the poet has been left behind.’ In contrast, he proposes a “poesía postpoética, o poesía expandida” ‘post-poetic or expanded poetry’ that encompasses a much broader and less self-absorbed compendium of the contemporary world than “los tan traídos y llevados conceptos poesía de la experiencia y poesía de la diferencia” (123) ‘the much hackneyed concepts of poetry of experience and poetry of difference.’ A major component of his “poesía postpoética” entails the inclusion of popular culture along with scientific and mathematical concepts put forward by chaos theorists and complex systems theorists (see “Hacia una poesía postpoética” 114).² His modern poetic sequence, *Joan Fontaine Odisea* (2005) ‘Joan Fontaine Odyssey’ exemplifies his new poetics, especially in his reliance on Paul Dirac’s Delta function. This article discusses how the poet incorporates these scientific and mathematical concepts and uses them as images in this work. But before examining the text, a few preliminary remarks are necessary.

First, I have designated the genre of this text following Rosenthal and Gall’s definition of a modern poetic sequence. These critics maintain that, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, what we normally would call a long poem has been superseded by the modern poetic sequence. According to them, “traditional ways to structure a long poem no longer satisfy the modern reader” (6):

The modern sequence . . . is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope. (9)

Joan Fontaine Odisea fits the definition of the lyric sequence modified by Fernández Mallo’s “poesía postpoética,” and in this study I approach it as such.

The second issue that begs explication concerns Dirac’s concept of the Delta function, which posits that in any complex system a relatively long period of time will elapse without any change in

activity. Suddenly, however, there will be a large spike, after which the system returns to the status quo.³ An everyday example of this phenomenon might be the traffic on a highway. For long stretches of time the traffic will flow smoothly only to be interrupted by an accident. Once the accident clears, traffic flow resumes its normal pace. Another example that we might adduce entails the use of a flash with some cameras. The photographer may not take a picture for some time, but when he does, the flash goes off, creating a spike in the expenditure of the electrical charge and a flash of visible light. Following that spike, the camera needs to recharge the flash, with the concomitant return to stasis. The Delta function correlates with the above definition of the poetic sequence inasmuch as the moments of lyrical intensity that punctuate the sequence are the spikes. The intervening passages represent the periods of flat language where the poet avails him/herself of techniques that serve to move the poem from one moment of lyric intensity to the next in the sequence.

Paratextual elements provide further valuable insights into Fernández Mallo's poetics. First of all, the full title, as it appears on the title page, reads as follows: "Poemario-performance **Joan Fontaine Odisea** [mi deconstrucción] a cargo de Agustín Fernández Mallo" 'A work of performance poetry Joan Fontaine Odisea [my deconstruction] under the direction of Agustín Fernández Mallo.' By calling the work a performance text under the direction of the author, this title questions the very authority of the poet, who in effect is both director and actor, a schizophrenic position between the author as controlling agent and as fictional character. Underscoring the transience of poetry as an event, the performative aspect highlights the possibility for the poet to assume, enact, and slip into and out of different roles, voices, and discourses. The document that precedes the poetic text per se supports this fictionalization process. Framed as an "instrumento público" 'a public instrument' in the legal sense, consisting of eight numbered folios, official stamps and insignia, and a notarized registration number, this document testifies to the conditions under which Fernández Mallo composed the text. Ostensibly written by a notary public named Bartolomé Bethe Fusters in Palma de Mallorca, the style of the document is legal and for the most part impersonal. Bethe Fusters functions as a legal witness to the performance and thus lends credibility and

veracity to a spurious yearlong event. However, when we reach the end of the document, the signature there is not Bethe Fusters's. It consists of a capital A followed by six numbered vertical strokes, the penultimate of which seems to bear an accent mark, suggesting the name Agustín. Again, the line between observer and observed, witness and participant, author and character, becomes blurred.



(instrumento público. Folio 5643778 [14])

Another significant paratextual aspect is related to the organization of the work. Even though the order of the sequence appears to be random, Fernández Mallo has numbered each segment using a decimal system, similar to philosophical works and especially Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, referenced in the text.⁴ The decimal numbering system suggests that a certain logic underlies the sequence and that the work resembles a treatise in the philosophical sense of the word. Combined with the other paratextual elements, the numbering adds an expository dimension to the work along with the orality of performance poetry, the legal discourse of the notarized document, and scientific theories. Fernández Mallo maintains that the shift from modernism to postmodernism in the sciences as well as the humanities has revealed the fictitious nature of reality and changed our understanding of metaphor (see "Hacia una poesía postpoética" 114-16). He therefore proposes a "poesía de la simulación o poesía simulada" 'poetry of simulation or simulated poetry': "la nueva forma de representación de los fenómenos por ordenador de la que se vale la investigación científica, y que según los filósofos de la ciencia ni es experiencia (laboratorio), ni es teoría (esencialismo de un yo teórico) sino otra cosa más poderosa que ambas y entre las cuales flota" (124) 'the new form of representation of phenomena on a computer of which scientific research avails itself, and that according to the philosophers of science is neither

experience (laboratory), nor theory (the essentialism of a theoretical I) but something else more powerful than both that floats between them.' By expanding the range of poetry to include scientific and mathematical concepts along with other discourses, Fernández Mallo calls into question the limits of poetic discourse and enriches the possibilities of poetic expression.

In addition to the more formal paratextual elements, the poet has framed the numbered segments with two passages set mainly in italics. This typeset indicates that the passages derive directly from the narrator's voiceover in Alfred Hitchcock's classic film *Rebecca* (1940), starring Joan Fontaine opposite Laurence Olivier, although the passages are in Spanish rather than English.⁵ The prior legal document informs us that, as part of the year-long performance of this poetic text, the poet had the film playing repeatedly, with the sound turned off, while composing the text. Moreover, it cautions the reader "Que la Odisea le pertenece a Joan Fontaine, no a él [Fernández Mallo]" ("instrumento público. Folio 5643777" [13]) 'That the Odyssey pertains to Joan Fontaine, not to him.' I submit that the change evident in the character portrayed by the actress as she confronts the image of Rebecca—a dead woman who never appears in the film even in flashback but whose presence dominates the other characters and drives the action—becomes confused with the biography of the actress and blurs the line between fiction and reality, fictionalizing the poet's process of creation in his formulation of "poesía postpoética" or "poesía simulada," poetry as a simulacrum of reality as well as of poetry.

The framing passages fulfill several functions. First of all, they introduce a filmic, ekphrastic discourse, multiplying the polyglossic discourse of the text with a layer of popular culture. This framing device replicates the film, delineating a representative block of the chaos of reality that problematizes reality itself.⁶ What is more, the non-italicized lines of these passages interrupt the citation of the voiceover, similar to the spike created by the Delta function. Such a procedure alerts readers to the way the current text functions, inserting itself in established sets of discourses and temporarily disrupting our habitual forms of writing and reading.

Throughout *Joan Fontaine Odisea* Fernández Mallo references a plethora of other texts including popular culture as well as traditional

works of literature, painting, music, philosophy, and critical theory. In light of the poet's emphasis on scientific discourse, I will dedicate the remainder of this article to an elucidation of scientific and mathematical references, relating them to the metapoetic aspects of the work.

Fernández Mallo's parenthetical insertion of the definition of a fermion and reference to Pauli's exclusion principle calls attention to the structure of fragment 35 of *Joan Fontaine Odisea*. This fragment begins with a sententious statement, juxtaposed at the end with an imagistic anecdotal scene, separated asymmetrically by the definition.

La soledad está ya en la máscara
que es la esencia,
en la materia,
en los *fermiones*

[*Fermión*: partícula material
sujeta al Principio de Exclusión de Paulli [*sic*]
según el cual no puede haber más
de una de estas partículas compartiendo
un mismo estado. A este fenómeno
se le denomina Soledad Fermiónica]

que nos constituyen.

Hace años que voy concibiendo un proyecto semigenial.
Cinco veces al día regreso al teclado. Mi madre cinco veces
al supermercado. Por la noche encendemos la luz y somos
un Hopper. (71)

Solitude is already in the mask
which is the essence,
in the material,
in the *fermions*

[*Fermion*: a material particle
subject to Pauli's Principle of Exclusion
according to which there cannot be more
than one of these particles sharing
the same space. This phenomenon
is called Fermionic Solitude]

that constitute us.

For several years now I have been conceiving a semi-brilliant
project.

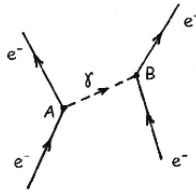
Five times a day I return to the keyboard. My mother five
times

to the supermarket. At night we turn on the light and we are
a Hopper.

According to Kenneth W. Ford, "Every particle—and indeed every entity built of particles, such as an atom or a molecule—is either a boson or a fermion" (132). These two types of particles share many properties, such as mass, weight, electrical charge, and the strength or weakness of their interaction with other particles (Ford 132-33). In contrast with bosons, however, fermions consist of an odd number of quarks and possess a different type of spin, making them less inclined to congregate with similar particles. To explain this phenomenon, Wolfgang Pauli formulated the exclusion principle, which states that "no two identical fermions (for instance, no two electrons) can occupy the same state of motion at the same time" (Ford 133). Hence, physicists describe fermions as "antisocial" in comparison with their counterpart bosons, which are more "social" (132-33).

By recognizing that fermions form a basic part of all matter, the poetic voice comments on the loneliness, solitude, or separation inherent in human existence. It might seem contradictory that the speaker and his mother share the same space—their home—where they spend each night together, forming a scene reminiscent of a painting by Edward Hopper. We might assume that they are "apart together," but these two "fermions" are not exactly alike: "The exclusion principle applies only to *identical* fermions" (Ford 140). If we consider the house where they dwell a nucleus consisting of different protons and neutrons (rooms), these two electrons do not share the same state of motion. Even though both circle their respective orbits five times a day, they participate in different activities: one, the introspective action of engaging with cyberspace, and the other, going to the market, spinning farther away from the nucleus; one feeding the mind, the other feeding the body. When they come together in the evening, they replicate what electrons do when they move to a lower state of energy, nearer to the nucleus (see

Ford 107-10). The mention of turning on a light depicts the transfer of a photon at the vortex of their proximity, as shown graphically in this Feynman diagram:



(Ford 86)

In spite of their differences, mother and son are alike in their sense of isolation. When they come near one another at the vortex A—B, a photon (γ) passes between them; weightless and massless, a photon is pure light. No other contact or communication occurs between the two. Knowledge of fermions and Pauli's exclusion principle helps us appreciate the loneliness, isolation, or separation inherent in our lives.

In another section of this work, fragments 13 and 13.1, the poet avails himself of Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle to comment on the indeterminacy of language. According to Heisenberg's theory, uncertainty in the observation of a subatomic particle's position multiplied by uncertainty in the observation of its momentum, must result in a more or less equal constant: $\Delta q \Delta p \approx h$. Because of the way we observe these particles, one measurement inversely affects the other. If we reduce the uncertainty of one aspect, we necessarily increase the uncertainty of another, thus maintaining Planck's constant (h). The inverse relationship of uncertainty between two entities takes various forms within and between the two parts of Fernández Mallo's fragment.

Shorter than its subsequent part, fragment 13 begins with what appears will be a logical definition of the nature of language. But this apparent objectivity takes a radical U-turn in the second line:

Lenguaje, una técnica que
acepté confiado, me condenó
a ensayar en mi carne la infinitud de la suya,
y un día deberé abandonar habiendo sido
no más que su alimento. (35)

both at the same time you go crazy.

Even though the speaker as poet has just stated how unreliable language is, here he states that the physicist enunciates principles unequivocally. To instantiate that unequivocal truth, he has even included the scientific formula of the uncertainty principle, but he has pointedly inverted the syntax of the opening line, calling attention to the scientist's sententiousness. The juxtaposition of the q with the p makes them inverse images, emphasized by the use of bold type below. In addition to this visual juxtaposition, the poet has placed the scientific equation within square brackets—his variation on parentheses—making them square rather than round, logical rather than emotional—again implying that the community of scientists has agreed on and accepted these arbitrary symbols. Expressed verbally—uncertainty of a particle's position multiplied by uncertainty of its momentum is greater than or equal to Planck's constant—the equation describes a physical phenomenon that is not observable but is known. Heisenberg precisely enunciates a phenomenon that necessarily entails uncertainty. The poetic voice provides another Nobel scientist's explanation of this equation. By again using square brackets to emphasize that these two men are esteemed members of their profession, the poet points to the absurdity of Pauli's assertion. What does he mean when he says "te vuelves loco"? Is this scientific terminology? Does his language objectively describe a scientific phenomenon? Paratactical juxtaposition of different elements continues in the next lines, where the poet alludes to the scientific concept of the frequency of a wavelength by dint of a metaphor.

Quién de niño en un jardín
no caminó alguna vez arrastrando
un palo por los barrotes de la verja sin adivinar
que lo que ahí ya buscaba era el consuelo
de algún estribillo . . . (35)

Who as a child in the yard
didn't walk at some point in time dragging
a stick along the bars of the fence without guessing
that what he was seeking there was the consolation

of some refrain . . .

Running a stick along the rods of a fence establishes a rhythmic sonority that has a hypnotic, pleasurable effect. Rhythmic repetition relaxes us (that is, "consoles" us) in the face of life's vicissitudes. Like the child with a stick, the physicist seeks comfort in knowledge about our world. But increasing the certainty about one characteristic necessarily decreases certainty about another. Different wavelengths reveal one or the other, but not both simultaneously. In short, changing the wavelength of light produces two different perspectives on reality (q and p), an analogy between the diverse perspectives of science and poetry. Which provides a "better" or "truer" or "more accurate" perspective on the world? Obviously, that conclusion depends on what we want to measure and what we would like to do with that measurement. This poem concludes with two radically different quotes that underscore this conflict and leave the resolution open-ended.

. . . esta noche
mi mujer y yo jugaremos
al juego de la muerte, escribió Tagore,
Nocilla, qué merendilla. Mamá más,
 cantó más tarde Siniestro Total[.] (35)

. . . tonight
my wife and I will play
the game of death, wrote Tagore,
Nocilla, what a snack. Mommy, more,
 Siniestro Total later sang.

On the one hand, a rather esoteric quote of the poet Rabindranath Tagore equates death and sex, where sex is viewed as a means of cheating death and emphasizing life. Pleasure derived from sexual activity creates the illusion of timelessness and so "cheats" death. In contrast, the reference to the punk rock group Siniestro Total's song "Nocilla ¡qué merendilla!" 'Nocilla, what a treat!' from their first album *¿Cuándo se come aquí?* (1982) 'When do we eat around here?' could also have erotic overtones of a much different type, alluding perhaps to oral sex. "Nocilla" is a product much like Nutella, which

is sold in the United States and is quite popular with children. Siniestro Total may also be parodying commercial advertisements and the “seduction” of children by means of sensorial pleasure and facile rhythms. Both quotes provide different perspectives on pleasure, yet both depend on language. If Heisenberg’s principle builds uncertainty into physics, it also signals the indeterminacy of language.

As stated above, Dirac’s Delta function serves as a paramount image in *Joan Fontaine Odisea*. The formula and graph of this function appear in the text of fragment 32, where the poet deals with the role of writing in his transition to adulthood, independence, and self-identity, and his aspirations for success. Once again, Fernández Mallo organizes the poem paratactically, abutting ideas and images that cohere in a spike of illumination exemplifying the Delta function as well as the speaker’s moment of discovery.

un día comienzan a dejar silencios
cuando les hablas, renuncian
los padres a la tribu, no vuelves a ser niño.

Escribir,
tumoración en el Silencio,
órgano latiente de la Nada.
Leer, interpretar,
derivaciones metastásicas.

De todo esto quedará la estatua de luz
erigida a la palabra de luz que cae del cielo y te deja clavado
a la mañana la última mañana. (66)

one day they begin to leave silences
when you talk to them your parents
renounce the tribe, you’re no longer a child.

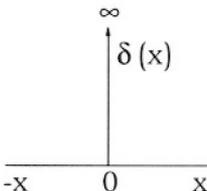
To write,
a growing tumor in the Silence,
a beating organ of Nothingness.
To read, to interpret,

the molecule [you] of oxide in carbon monoxide

the piece of running water

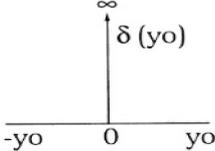
immobile because its context was more water . . .

The Formula One racecourse at Monza, Italy, has a very distinct track that the drivers follow in their race to win fame and fortune. A snowfall at dawn not only erases the set contours of that course but also illuminates and blinds the observer-participant. This image represents the poet's encounter with the blank page: on the one hand, he can feel free to explore, to create his own pathway, to go beyond predetermined limits; but on the other hand, he may go too far off the beaten path, lose his way, or simply be too far afield to receive recognition. In like manner, we usually think of carbon monoxide (CO)—not to be confused with the more lethal carbon dioxide (CO₂)—as a toxic gas that in high quantities can harm and even kill humans. However, the poetic voice identifies the poet as the oxygen molecule that combines with the carbon molecule, bringing life and fresh air to what is a fundamental and ancient, but stale element (carbon/language). As a symbol of air and inspiration, carbon monoxide has beneficial purposes, serving as a neurotransmitter, an anti-inflammatory, a vasodilator, and a promoter of neovascular growth. If we consider that carbon occurs naturally as graphite, the metapoetic aspect of stimulating the writing process subtly underlies the image. It is unclear, then, whether this image is positive or negative. These considerations lead the poetic voice directly to Dirac's Delta function. The poet includes the equation and the graph in the poem:

$$\delta(x) = \begin{cases} \infty & \text{si } x=0 \\ 0 & \text{si } x \neq 0 \end{cases}$$


(66)

The value that the Delta function (δ) attains or represents at point x —whatever the quantity we wish to measure—will yield an infinitely high spike (like the flash of a camera) if $x = 0$, but it will yield 0 if $x \neq 0$. The zero marks any point on the continuum (the horizontal axis), which we can define in terms of either space or time. The poetic voice equates the Delta function with a self-portrait and substitutes the self—“yo”—for x :

$$\delta(y_0) = \begin{cases} \infty & \text{si } (y_0) = 0 \\ 0 & \text{si } (y_0) \neq 0 \end{cases}$$


(67)

In this way the poet comments on the aleatory nature of success as a writer. The impulse to infinity marks the moment of presenting oneself as a writer, presenting one’s work for others to read. This particular moment in the poet’s trajectory along the horizontal axis may lead to fame and immortality (∞) or to transience and fleeting brilliance that does not withstand the passage of time ($-\infty$). The final line of the poem captures this paradox: “*por qué la nada y no algo*” (67). The italics alert us that this line is a quote. Ironically, and intentionally or not, the poet has inverted the elements in Leibniz’s question, “Why something and not nothing?,” a phrase modified by Heidegger as “Why entity and not nothing?”⁷ The inversion of the words “something” and “nothing” points to the interchangeability of the binary terms optimism and pessimism, success and failure, and to the element of chance in any of life’s endeavors.

In *Joan Fontaine Odisea*, Fernández Mallo avails himself of sundry references to high and popular culture. These references include film and television, painting, novels and poetry, music, philosophy, magazines, brand names, bar codes, mythology, videogames, architecture, and others. But what distinguishes him from the majority of his contemporaries and predecessors is the integration of scientific and mathematical concepts, equations,

and even graphs. I know of only two other poets in Spain who have attempted similar innovations: María Eloy-García's use of mathematical terminology in *Diseños experimentales* (1997) 'Experimental designs' and Vicente Luis Mora's use of computer and cyberspace terminology in *Mester de cibervía* (2000) 'Cyberspace poet.' In light of the growing emphasis on scientific literacy and interdisciplinarity in the twenty-first century, and the even greater marginality of poetry in recent decades, Fernández Mallo proposes that scientific imagery will provide a much needed impetus to the creation of poetry and thus a greater integration of poetry in contemporary culture. Knowledge of scientific concepts is essential to appreciate *Joan Fontaine Odisea*, a poetical treatise defining Fernández Mallo's "poesía postpoética."

Notes

1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 For additional information on Fernández Mallo's poetics, see his collection of ideas in "Poesía postpoética: Un diagnóstico. Una propuesta" 'Post-poetic poetry: A diagnostic. A proposal.'

3 For a presentation on Dirac's Delta function, see the khanacademy.org's video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qfdCwys2ew>.

4 The poet also mentions Wittgenstein in his essays, expressing admiration for the philosopher's works. In "Hacia un nuevo paradigma" he suggests, "De hecho, muchos pensamos que algún día se leerá a Einstein o a Wittgenstein de la misma manera que hoy leemos a Lucrecio: pura poesía" (113) 'In fact, many of us think that one day people will read Einstein or Wittgenstein in the same way that today we read Lucretius: pure poetry.'

5 Joan Fontaine is the younger sister of Olivia de Havilland and starred in such classic films as *Gunga Din*, *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* (for which she won the Academy Award in 1942), *Jane Eyre*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Tender Is the Night*.

6 Elizabeth Grosz provides a lucid and cogent discussion of the concept of framing in architecture and art in *Chaos, Territory, Art* (esp. 10-17).

7 See Leibniz, "Principles of Nature and of Graces, Founded on Reason" (1714), §7. The translation I have consulted puts the question thus: "Why does something exist rather than nothing?" (415). Fernández Mallo's version asks an existential question as to why one has success or failure as a writer, thus leading to fame and immortality or oblivion.

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