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## Other Tigers: A Theme in Valéry and Borges

THE DEVELOPMENT of similar themes in the work of Paul Valéry and Jorge Luis Borges is a subject which has not yet been thoroughly explored. Although some of these themes are of central importance for an understanding of both writers—for example, the idea of the anonymous, universal spirit of literature, or the intricacies of the memory and the self—it is probable that the essential link between the two will be found less in the content of their work than in a certain manner of being, the “personalidad” of which Borges speaks in his essay, *Valéry como símbolo*.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as Valéry “personifica los laberintos del espíritu,” and appears to be “una derivación del Chevalier Dupin de Edgar Allan Poe y del inconcebible Dios de los teólogos,” he seems more closely related to the ambiguous, mythical creatures in Borges’ tales than to the restrained and frugal poet who claims that art should be “verde y humilde”<sup>2</sup> rather than filled with wonders. But the “personalidad” is far more than an image for public consumption.<sup>3</sup> Behind the myth of Valéry, Borges recognizes that there is “un hombre que trasciende los rasgos diferenciales del yo,” and who “prefirió siempre los lúcidos placeres del pensamiento y las secretas aventuras del orden.” In this lies the true relationship of two very dissimilar writers; for the pleasures of lucidity and the search for order are the governing principles in the work of each.

The study of a common theme should, however, reveal how close

<sup>1</sup> *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1960), pp. 105-107.

<sup>2</sup> “Arte poética,” *El Hacedor* (Buenos Aires, 1960), pp. 101-102.

<sup>3</sup> Guillermo Sucre defines this “personalidad” or “yo ideal” as the “yo [que] se va haciendo a la par del poema.” *Borges el poeta* (Caracas, 1968), p. 131.

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and how divergent such a relationship may be. It is certain that, in the case of the theme of the tiger, Borges had no need to borrow suggestions from anyone. We know from the prose passage "Dreamtigers," written during the thirties, that tigers had obsessed him from a very early age; and commentators tell us that for him the tiger symbol has many and varied meanings.<sup>4</sup> It would be unwise, then, to seek another link between the two prose compositions by Valéry—"Tiger" and "Le même"—and Borges' "Dreamtigers" and the poem "El otro tigre," beyond that provided by the common point of departure and a certain correspondence in development. What is of the greatest interest is the resonance of the theme in the poetic mind of the two writers, and the echoes it awakens of all the major chords in their work.

Valéry's studies, "Tiger" and "Le même," appear together in *Mélange*.<sup>5</sup> Both date from impressions received, as the title and the first lines indicate, from a visit to the London Zoo; but while the first is a series of rapid reflections linked by dashes, in a telegraphic style which communicates both perceptions and thoughts at the same impetuous rate (with intenser feelings breaking out in italics), the second is obviously composed with care and attention to producing a greater literary effect. The two compositions are, in fact, an excellent example of Valéry's rewriting techniques.

The first few lines of "Tiger" plant the reader brusquely face to face with the animal and the vivid thoughts of the man studying it: "Londres—Tigre au Zoo—Admirable bête, à tête d'un sérieux formidable et ce masque *connu*, où il y a du Mongol, une puissance royale, une possibilité, expression fermée de pouvoir . . ." In an instant, we are situated and led from the appreciation of the customary qualities of the tiger—"admirable," "formidable," "une puissance royale"—into the consideration of what the tiger's attributes mean in the human mind. The rapid list combines what is expected about the tiger with the concomitant human interpretations: its "deadly seriousness," the cruelty of the Mongol and the Oriental slanted eyes, the power and association with royalty, the uncertainty and the unfathomable quality of its strength. The common image of the tiger is intensified by its symbolic

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<sup>4</sup> For example: "Chez lui le tigre est non seulement la force et la violence, l'obscurité, le feu et le Mal, mais aussi le temps. Dans bien des passages mais surtout dans la conclusion . . . de son essai *Nouvelle réfutation du temps*, le tigre apparaît avec le fleuve et le feu, pour symboliser l'Ennemi. Il est aussi soit et nostalgie d'une violence dont Borgès, par sa vie protégée de bibliothécaire, n'a aucune expérience." *Borgès par lui-même* (Paris, 1970), p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), I, 293-295. "Le même" did not appear in the first edition of *Mélange*, by the Bibliophiles de l'Automobile-Club de France, in 1939.

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function, so that we immediately have far more than a caged beast: we are transported towards the perfection of the idea of the tiger, to the essence of what it signifies: "quelque chose d'au-delà de la cruauté—une expression de fatalité—Tête de maître *absolu* au repos—Ennuyé, formidable, chargé—*Impossible d'être plus idéalement tigre.*"

In one bound, Valéry has reached his favorite ground, the spot from which he contemplates the beauties of power, potentiality, and purity. The tiger, endowed with absolute mastery, is like Valéry's Tiberius, beyond mere cruelty. The inner power it exudes, without using it, is that dreamed of by Monsieur Teste, a power corresponding exactly and fatally with its own total possibilities. But in the tiger, as in the Jeune Parque before the cruel ravages of consciousness, being and act are one. It is pure animal, the symbol that thought creates to signify the absence of the rift that separates thought from being. "Parfois je pense, parfois je suis,"<sup>6</sup> was not written of the tiger. He *is*.

But this ideal animal has a living body which quivers and twitches unexpectedly. This reminds Valéry of another theme, one that haunts him persistently, that of the mysterious workings of the body.<sup>7</sup> The most profound thinker is ignorant of the activity of his liver; or, conversely—as in "L'Idée fixe"—an entire anatomy can be disorganized by an unwanted thought. The tiger can have no such problems. Is he master of his twitching tail? Valéry would like to think so, since the tiger's organization seems perfect. "Cet animal a l'air d'un grand empire." If the inner connections are as absolute as Valéry suggests, this adds a new dimension to the idealization, that of the internal totality corresponding to the external. In that case, the tiger, on an animal level, would be the Cartesian model of complete control that Valéry dreams of in his more mystic moments.

In the third place, characteristically, comes the thought of literature. How does one write about a tiger? Valéry, with coquetry, declares that he will not. He would rather "le posséder dans son état de vie et de forme mobile, déformable par l'acte, avant que de le traiter par écriture." He suggests, therefore, that what he has written is not literature, and that the image he has projected is not that of the "living" tiger, particularized by the event, which is what literature would demand; but rather a simple series of observations of his own mental phenomena. The artist's eye, however, notes the parallel patterns of stripes against the bars, as the other animals pace, like the regular swing of the pendulum, back and forth, while the central figure—our tiger—performs the only visible, individual act in the passage: he yawns. This act becomes, like

<sup>6</sup> Choses tues," in *Œuvres*, II, 500.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example, the *Discours aux chirurgiens*, in *Œuvres*, I, esp. 915-916.

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the rest, of completely general import. The yawning of the tiger is, in its turn, a symbol of the "présence et absence de l'âme du tigre, qui attend éternellement l'événement." The yawn, a sign of devastating *Ennui*, proffered by the "gueule," which can signify destruction, is the ultimate scorn of unemployed power. "Je méprise ce que je puis," says Teste.<sup>8</sup> The tiger, fearfully competent and immobile, absent from what is, and present with what is not—that is the sense of "attente"—creates in Valéry that peculiar tension which fascinates him in the equilibrium between potential force and possible act.

"Le même" is what Valéry declares he will *not* make of his first impressions: literature. The same themes are presented in a carefully written series of paragraphs, beginning with a description of the supine tiger and of the man mesmerized in front of it, and ending with lofty praise of the animal's perfect attributes. With diffident irony, the author spells out what he is really engaged in doing, i.e., lending human traits to the beast: "Je cherche ingénument à lire des attributs humains sur son muse admirable." The swift phrases of the first version are rounded out: "une expression de fatalité" becomes "je ne sais quelle certitude d'être fatal"; "Cet animal a l'air d'un grand empire" lengthens to "Cet être me fait songer vaguement à un grand empire." The picturesque is emphasized: the "masque connu" and "la robe fauve fouettée de noir" amplify into "cette face . . . étrangement voilée, ou ornée d'une dentelle très déliée d'arabesques noires très élégantes, comme peintes sur le masque de poil doré." The dangerous theme of the mysterious body is muted harmoniously to "Je compose dans mon esprit les forces et les formes de ce magnifique seigneur . . ." The theme of literature is replaced by literature itself, culminating in a sumptuous hymn of praise worthy of Leonardo himself: "Il n'est pas possible d'être plus soi-même, plus exactement armé, doué, chargé, instruit de tout ce qu'il faut pour être parfaitement tigre. Il ne peut lui venir d'appétit ni de tentation qui ne trouvent en lui leurs moyens les plus prompts."

There remains the scorn motif; this Valéry turns suddenly against himself and against all word-mongering and dilly-dallying. "Je lui donne cette devise: SANS PHRASES!" Here, Valéry is engaging, via literature, in a demonstration of the futility of the literary act. No amount of rhetoric can represent either the ideality or the reality of the tiger. One may prefer the nervous, rapid style of the unpolished "Tiger," which reflects the flashing of thoughts through the writer's

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<sup>8</sup> "Quelques pensées de Monsieur Teste," *Œuvres*, II, 71. In his first *Cahier*, Valéry observes: "Thème du pouvoir. Agrandissement du pouvoir silencieusement. Le seul but étant peut-être le mépris compétent." *Cahiers de Paul Valéry* (Paris, 1957), I, 809.

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mind, as well as the contained, "pendular" movements of the caged animals, to the rather more pompous constructions of "Le même." From the tiger's point of view it does not matter. Neither can do more than say "The tiger is a tiger," and "The tiger is the stimulus of such and such particular thoughts in the mind of Paul Valéry."

Borges' "Dreamtigers," published in *El Hacedor* in 1960,<sup>9</sup> although it had appeared under a pseudonym much earlier, seems to be a straightforward description of a childhood passion. "En la infancia yo ejercí con fervor la adoración del tigre . . ." The author explains how he would linger before the cages at the zoo, and seek out in the encyclopedia all the information he could find about them. Later, the passion waned, but the tigers would return in his dreams; not, however, as simple reproductions of tigers he had seen, but as the impulse to create, to *cause* a tiger. "Voy a causar un tigre." The would-be tiger-maker is, alas, incompetent. In spite of all his efforts, the tiger does not come out as a tiger, but as some incredible and ridiculous mixture. "Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de forma, o de un tamaño inadmisibile, o harto fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro." The "ilimitado poder" that the author imagines in his dream that he possesses is strictly ineffective.

The famous poem, "El otro tigre,"<sup>10</sup> arrives at the same conclusion by following another path. The introductory quotation from Morris—"And the craft that createth a semblance"—informs us at once that here the point of departure is no "real" tiger. It is a dreamtiger created by the imagination of the author amongst the books of the library. But such is the force of his inner vision that the bookshelves fall away and the animal—"Fuerte, inocente, ensangrentado y nuevo"—moves out into a tiger's world without names, past or future, filled with special scents—"el trezado laberinto de los olores"—a world striped and shining like the skin over the tiger structure. "Entre las rayas de bambú descifro / Sus rayas y presiente la osatura / Bajo la piel espléndida que vibra." Even the distance that separates dreamer from tiger becomes part of the picture. So powerful for a moment is the feeling of the creature's existence that it is directly apostrophized. "Desde esta casa de un remoto puerto / De América del Sur, te sigo y sueño, / Oh tigre de las márgenes del Ganges."

The initial movement of the poem stops abruptly here with the appearance of reflective thought. "Pienso" and "sueño" are replaced by "reflexiono / Que el tigre vocativo de mi verso / Es un tigre de símbolos y sombras, / Una serie de tropos literarios / Y de memorias

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<sup>9</sup> *El Hacedor*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

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de la enciclopedia." The tiger of symbols is not what Borges wants and he tries again to join the real tiger. "Al tigre de los símbolos he opuesto / El verdadero, el de caliente sangre, / El que diezma la tribu de los búfalos / Y hoy, 3 de agosto del 59, / Alarga en la pradera una pausada / Sombra . . ." But in vain, because the use of symbols can only engender a symbol: "pero ya el hecho de nombrarlo / Y de conjeturar su circunstancia / Lo hace ficción del arte y no criatura / Viviente de las que andan por la tierra."

Should he—and the reader ("buscaremos")—try for a third time, the result can only and forever be the same. "Será como los otros una forma / De mi sueño, un sistema de palabras / Humanas y no el tigre vertebrado / Que, más allá de las mitologías, / Pisa la tierra . . ." That is no longer the important point. What matters is that some unexplained force drives him to try, again and again, to join the reality that is not in his mind, nor in anything he can write. "Bien lo sé, pero algo / Me impone esta aventura indefinida / Insensata y antigua, y persevero / En buscar por el tiempo de la tarde / El otro tigre, el que no está en el verso."

In this poem Borges is, in fact, returning to the essential problems of mind, reality, and the literary act. As many critics have pointed out, he is haunted by the unreality of the "real," and its teeming manifestations in the world. Unlike his beloved Berkeley ("una de las personas más queribles que en la memoria de los hombres perduran"),<sup>11</sup> he has no guarantee that any divine power authenticates either the mind that perceives or the phenomenon that is perceived. He can only create reality by an act of Schopenhauerian will, seeking to find in the mysterious signs which fill the universe and which man tries unceasingly to read, the impossible moment when the Word or Symbol coincides with the secret of what is. In the course of this effort, he creates in his turn new symbols, such as poems and books. But just as "la poesía está en el comercio del poema con el lector, no en la serie de símbolos que registran las páginas de un libro,"<sup>12</sup> so the tiger can only come into being at the instant of the apprehension of the tiger itself by the mind. However, the mind can only function by symbols; therefore "el hecho de nombrarlo y de conjeturar" already makes the tiger unattainable. It will never be "en el verso." The process is then a desperate one, but unavoidable. As in the remarkable fable, "La Escritura del Dios," man lies in an almost completely circular prison, trying to read, in the patterns on the back of a tiger, the inscrutable word of God. Should he

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<sup>11</sup> Prólogo, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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succeed, it will cease to have any importance for him as man, for he will have gone beyond the human condition. "Que muera conmigo el misterio que está escrito en los tigres. Quien ha entrevisto el universo, quien ha entrevisto los ardientes designios del universo, no puede pensar en un hombre, en sus triviales dichas o desventuras, aunque ese hombre sea él . . ."13

"El otro tigre" is therefore the poem-symbol of the eternal chase that seeks to track and hold perceptions of the "real" world. It conveys both the hopelessness of the pursuit and the inevitability of its continuance, forming a perfect parable of philosophy. The result of man's efforts to portray the world, says Borges in the epilogue to *El Hacedor*, is a labyrinthine portrait of his own face. At best, like Marino in "Una rosa amarilla," he may discover in a moment of illumination that the real object "estaba en su eternidad y no en sus palabras y que podemos mencionar o aludir pero no expresar . . ."14 The tiger "in the forests of the night" must stay there; it can only give literature a pretext for explaining that, as "literature," it can never capture its prey.

The common theme of the tiger is bent by each poet in the direction of his most profound and permanent preoccupations. It is significant that Valéry begins with a "real" tiger whose "reality," however, he does not bother to question. The thing-in-itself is unimportant; the essential element is its effect on the senses and thought of the beholder. For him, the tiger perceived relates to a concept already held, *connu*, of what a tiger should be like, and does so in the most satisfactory way possible. It is therefore the activator of several series already constituted in Valéry's mind, with all the local variants that the tiger affords. These series, as the reader of Valéry (especially of the *Cahiers*) is aware, often derive from the relationship between *moyens* and  *fins*, with the aim of a perfect adaptation of power to performance. From his earliest years, Valéry dreamed of a creature who would be absolute potential, whether it be a Leonardo who could translate this latent power into art and science, or a Teste who would keep this treasure of the possible intact and unexpended. The tiger, in the realm of the animal, provides him with a perfect symbol of the ideal relationship between the means and the ends, with the addition of physical beauty which delights the sensual Valéry, and with an aura of deadly inevitability which pleases him no less.

The animal, let us recall, is the "pure" element in creation for Valéry; it is not contaminated by thought. His ideal is to restore to the thinking animal the purity, i.e., the immediacy linking desire to act, that char-

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13 *Nueva antología personal* (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 285.

14 *El Hacedor*, p. 31.

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acterizes the nonthinking beast.<sup>16</sup> Teste is an "animal intellectuel,"<sup>16</sup> Leonardo "un modèle de bel animal pensant."<sup>17</sup> The tiger, pure, powerful, and inactive, must necessarily illuminate in Valéry the whole complex of carefully elaborated thoughts that underlie his effort to codify the human mind. That the tiger is caged, and therefore prevented from acting, is glossed over (although Valéry is not unaware of this problem, as is shown by the comments of Monsieur Teste on his own imprisonment).<sup>18</sup> But the writer does not wish to dwell on this, preferring to stress the final essential element of the animal's perfection: the scorn for all that is not *now*.

It is understandable that Borges' tiger starts in the mind and develops as a whole series of sense images before it runs into the impossibility of becoming a "tigre vertebrado." It is equally understandable that the picture originates in a library, for with Borges all things begin with books, and the tiger, no doubt, with Blake. The physical and historical conditions of Borges' life are the "reality" from which all his mental exploration begins, and from which he constructs other realities which seem to him equally probable and improbable. Books can deform, abolish, or multiply all the conditions of time and space, once they are associated with the human mind. The encyclopedia out of which comes Borges' tiger contains the possibilities of a million more, and the mind can create them all. The difficulty is not in the world of the symbol, which is self-perpetuating; it is in the world of the thing-in-itself which is inaccessible, yet tempts us incessantly to join it. Valéry tranquilly accepts this condition, and operates from the premise that what matters is the mental phenomenon resulting from perception. Borges worries the notion of a reality corresponding to any mental phenomenon. Valéry's tiger is caged and immobilized in order to provide the basis for further reflection. Borges' tiger runs free in the universe of alternatives, and no attempt to pin it down in time—"hoy, 3 de agosto del 59"—or in space—"en Sumatra o en Bengala"—can bring about its capture. One is conceptualized in advance; the other refuses to emerge from the forest of concepts.

Literature, then, has a different although similar role to play in each case. For Valéry, it is a subordinate activity, dependent upon the progress of thought and the ability to assemble technical means of expres-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Paraboles*, *Œuvres* I, 198: "quand Dieu, et les Choses, et les Anges et les Animaux / Et la Lumière qui est Archange / Étaient tout ce qui était, / CE FUT L'ÈRE DE PURETÉ."

<sup>16</sup> *Cahiers*, IV, 378.

<sup>17</sup> *Œuvres*, I, 1210.

<sup>18</sup> See "Quelques pensées de Monsieur Teste," *Œuvres*, II, 69: "On lui donne une prison dont il dit: Je m'enferme."



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sion. He is more interested in "possessing" the tiger "dans son état de vie et de forme mobile, déformable par l'acte," than in putting it down in writing. When he does do so, he attempts to compose "dans mon esprit les forces et les formes de ce magnifique seigneur" in such a way that the sinuousness of his phrase reproduces the suppleness of the animal, and the sudden violence of his conclusion, the unexpected leap of the predator. "Le même" is an exercise in form adjusted to the tiger's shape, just as the content is an effort to adjust to the idea of the tiger. It is an addition, however, since Valéry distinguishes between his first hasty notes and the worked-over version of his impressions; in other words, the literature is detachable, a supplementary formation, not absolutely necessary to the original thought, nor to the "possession" of the tiger. It is nevertheless a new formal contact of the reader with the beast. "L'existence de la poésie est essentiellement niable; de quoi l'on peut tirer de prochaines tentations d'orgueil.—Sur ce point elle ressemble à Dieu même," writes Valéry in *Tel Quel I*. At no moment is the "écriture" the sole end that Valéry proposes to himself in describing the tiger; but he can, if and when he wishes, cease to deny, and by an act of faith, revalidate literature.

The ambiguity of Valéry's attitude towards the act of writing is light in texture compared with the shadow of doubt expressed by Borges' poem. These uneven lines, so strongly marked by the assonance of "a" and "o," do not directly impugn poetry as such; they illustrate the point that poetry will never be the way to attain reality, that bloody tiger which can only destroy. But they add that the poet is driven into "esta aventura indefinida / insensata y antigua" by something that he cannot define, even though he knows the hopelessness of his quest. Poetry, in the end, can only be a collection of symbols and "los altos y soberbios volúmenes que formaban en un ángulo de la sala una penumbra de oro no eran . . . un espejo del mundo, sino una cosa más agregada al mundo."<sup>10</sup> The moment of allusion is all he can hope for. There is, in Borges' doubt, a tinge of metaphysical yearning that is quite foreign to Valéry.

Why are both writers drawn to the symbol of the tiger, the exotic beast foreign to the daily life of Frenchman or Argentinian? For its beauty, violence, and power, no doubt, but above all, for its nearness and its distance. For both poets it represents the glimpsed splendor of what Rodríguez Monegal calls "the imminent and the inaccessible," absent and present, caged and free, tantalizing man into imperfect creation. But the object to be attained differs. Valéry tends incessantly

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<sup>10</sup> "Una rosa amarilla," *El Hacedor*, pp. 31-32.

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towards the acquisition of a formula for mental power that will forever make the "phrase" unnecessary, the single example a superfluity. If we knew what beauty is, we should not need beautiful objects. If we possessed all the rules of perfect mental governance, we should not need poems to illustrate them. But although Valéry is often characterized as a mystic of the intellect, he is careful to emphasize that the rules he seeks are subjective, and will not explain the "universe" (a word which he considers should be abolished). He is content to incorporate the tiger into his own mental order, dreaming, like Agathe, that once the complete system of relations has been formed within the Self, it will function with no further need of words, or of stimulus from without.

Borges suspects that there will be no such satisfaction, and that therefore the words will continue for ever. It is perhaps no accident that in the Prologue to his *Antología personal*, he misquotes the well-known line from the "Cimetière marin" as "Comme le fruit se fond en *puissance*." The correct word is, of course, "jouissance," and the substitution of power for enjoyment by Borges indicates, we may think, how much more he desires from poetry than does Valéry. If the power of poetry could equal the power of reality, then both might instantly vanish, like the palace in the "Parábola del Palacio," which is eliminated by the word of the poet. What more awesome proof of omnipotence could there be? But in Borges' story, the poet's descendants are still searching for that fatal word; we must surmise, therefore, that it is not yet, and may never be found.

For both poets, then, literature falls into the category of means, and not that of ends, since for Valéry it should lead the writer back to the study of mental laws, and for Borges it is one of the steps in the endless pursuit of the universal. Both aim eventually beyond poetry; neither achieves this aim, but the poem remains to show in what diverse ways the search for lucidity and order can transform the reality of the tiger.

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