

## Crises of Faith: An Overview of Critical Commentary

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Surprisingly little seems to have been written about any crises of faith depicted in English and American literature before the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> After that point, however, discussions of the topic become much more numerous, especially in scholarship dealing with Victorian literature. Nonetheless, a few books dealing with earlier periods do discuss crises of faith and doubt. They also provide general overviews of such matters from early times to the present day. Of these books, John D. Barbour's *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* seems most valuable, especially because it deals with crises of faith in works from the late Roman period to the late twentieth century. Barbour discusses the writings of St. Augustine, John Bunyan, John Newman, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Frederick Douglass, Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, Edmund Gosse, Jean Paul Sartre, Mary McCarthy, and many others.

Barbour focuses mainly on crises of Christian faith, but he also considers such matters as race, gender, and modern cults. He suggests that those who suffer a "deconversion," or loss of faith, undergo an experience that displays several common traits:

A deconversion has four basic characteristics that different autobiographers may emphasize to a greater or lesser extent. Deconversion involves doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs. Second, deconversion is characterized by moral criticism of not only particular actions or practices but an entire way of life. Third, the loss of faith brings emotional upheaval, especially such painful feelings as grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair. Finally, a person's deconversion is usually marked by the rejection of the community to which he or she belonged. Deconversion encompasses, then, intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from a community. (2)

Barbour contends that Augustine's *Confessions* is especially important because it set patterns for many later writings. He also stresses that Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) likewise influenced subsequent works.

Another especially valuable overview of the crisis of faith theme in European and American literature is *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Man: Literature and Theodicy*, a sizeable anthology of essays edited by Rudolf Freiburg and Susanne Gruss. This collection presents thirty-one essays by an international group of scholars dealing with many renowned literary figures, such as Francis Bacon, John Milton, Daniel Defoe, Edward Young, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, William Blake, Wordsworth, Herman Melville, Oscar Wilde, Graham Greene, François Mauriac, Aldous Huxley, Albert Camus, John Fowles, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, and others. It also offers chapters on broad topics such as the Holocaust, fantasy novels, and contemporary British and Irish drama. Not all the essays are equally helpful, nor do all focus specifically on crises of faith, but the introduction, by Freiburg and Gruss, provides a broad and very useful overview of the volume as a whole.

Another helpful survey of religious skepticism is Jennifer Michael Hecht's massive study titled *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. As the subtitle implies, the book is comprehensive, stretching from early civilizations to the late twentieth century. *Doubt* is especially useful because it deals with non-Western cultures, including those of China, India, and Japan, and non-Christian religions such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. However, Hecht's book deals mainly with confirmed atheists. Consequently, rather than discussing people who suffered from real, painful crises of faith, she deals mostly with those who had already lost their faith, had no faith to lose, or had no feelings of attraction to religion because they were already skeptics. Nevertheless, Hecht does sometimes deal

with crises of faith in the usual senses of that term. For instance, commenting on the ways early Christian culture differed from earlier non-Christian traditions, she writes,

Doubt was thus an accepted aspect of Greek and Jewish life, but not the center of it. With Christianity, managing one's doubt, that is, husbanding one's faith, became the central drama. (175)

Jesus worked miracles and his apostles doubted them and, indeed, his whole mission, repeatedly. Just as the word *belief* becomes important in the Bible only when Jesus arrives, the word *doubt* is hardly ever mentioned in the Hebrew Bible—and is almost always tucked in an innocuous phrase—"no doubt" this or "no doubt" that—but is prevalent in the Christian New Testament. (178)

Hecht emphasizes the rather ironic nature of the Christian faith: to believe is to struggle, at times, with unbelief.

Another especially helpful historical overview of doubt and of crises of faith appears in James Turner's book *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*. Despite the book's subtitle, which implies a focus on American unbelief, its opening chapter offers an extended discussion of the rise of doubt in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Turner argues that "up until at least the sixteenth century" in Europe, the

religion of the common folk appears often to have been more a kind of collective habit than personally felt belief, their beliefs perhaps closer to folklore than Christianity. Ordinary people often knew nothing of the most fundamental doctrines. (1)

There is no clear evidence that any permanent state of unbelief, genuine atheism or agnosticism, ever actually existed in the Middle Ages. (2)

The Reformation, Turner argues, shattered the unity of the medieval church, “much against the wishes of the leading reformers. Instead of the universal church, churches emerged, spelled out their differences, and competed with each other—often violently, always vocally. Protestant was set against Catholic, then Protestant against Protestant” (9). This growth of “religious competition,” Turner claims, “affected in two ways the future of belief in God. First, open religious debate, sometimes about the most fundamental Christian doctrines, occasionally raised questions that probed even deeper.” In addition, “squabbles among churches, and the toleration eventually imposed to reestablish civil peace, compromised church authority and accelerated a process of secularization already under way for other reasons” (9). For these reasons, Turner asserts, “even devoutly orthodox Christians encountered questions that earlier would never have achieved public notoriety. A new structure for intellectual life had taken shape, a secularized structure less subject to churchly restraints, more open to conflicting ideas, less apt to stultify or freeze out questioning about God and His ways” (13).

Though Turner’s book focuses primarily on the United States, it still provides a splendid initial overview of prior European developments. Julius H. Rubin’s *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* does even more of the same. Thus Rubin notes that Martin Luther, writing in 1545, a year before his death, offers an autobiographical account of his suffering as a sinner who could not find forgiveness in the sight of an angry and righteous God:

Although I lived an irreproachable life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God; nor was I able to believe that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love—in fact, I hated—that righteous God who punished sinners, if not with silent blasphemy, then certainly with great murmuring. I was angry with God, saying “As if it were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned through original sin, with all kinds of misfortunes laid upon them by the

Old Testament law, and yet God adds sorrow upon sorrow through the gospel, and even brings his wrath and righteousness to bear through it!" Thus I drove myself mad, with a desperate disturbed conscience. (21)

Luther, according to Rubin, believed that repeatedly "through the course of life, the believer would lapse into despair. Through prayer, humility, devotion to Scripture, and direct combat with Satan, Luther confronted his depressions." Rubin also quotes the noted scholar Roland Bainton, who argued that "Luther felt that his depressions were necessary. At the same time they were dreadful and by all means and in every way to be avoided and overcome. His whole life was a struggle against them, a fight for faith" (24).

Rubin also reports that John Calvin, perhaps the most influential of all Protestant theologians, suffered, like Luther, "from religious anxiety throughout his life. Both shaped their doctrines," according to Rubin, "out of the material of their inner spiritual crises" (25). He quotes William J. Bouwsma's claim that although Calvin's

career was filled with accomplishments, his inner life showed few signs of the progress which he associated with godliness; he was still wrestling at the end of his life with self-doubt, confusion, and contradictory impulses that had been with him at the beginning. A life of episodic self-doubt, resting on the foundations of spiritual anxiety and terrible fears of personal insufficiency, remains part of the theological legacy bequeathed by Calvin's doctrines and unsuccessful resolutions of his own spiritual malaise. (25)

As Rubin reports, "Calvin wrote of the alternation of assurance and doubt, security and anxiety in the Christian life." In fact, he quotes Calvin as asserting that "when we say that faith must be certain and secure, we certainly speak not of an assurance which is never affected by doubt, nor a security which anxiety never assails." Instead, Calvin continued, "believers have a perpetual struggle with their own distrust (28).

The next major figure Rubin examines is Bunyan, whose “allegorical tale, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and . . . spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, . . . exemplify the theme of the self in *auto-machia* [an internal, agonizing conflict, a “war” within oneself] oscillating between times of comfort and despair” (34). Rubin quotes Bunyan as writing, “And now I was both a burden and a terror to myself. I was weary of life and afraid to die. How gladly I would have been anyone but myself, anything but a man, and in any condition but my own! It came to me frequently that it was impossible for me to be forgiven and to be saved from the wrath to come” (34).

In fact, as Rubin notes, Calvinists such as Bunyan “could never ultimately know God’s plan and their preordained status of election. Doubt, despair, times of spiritual dryness, and ‘dark nights of the soul’ assailed believers with troubled convictions that God had abandoned them; God’s grace remained hidden from their hearts.” Rubin reports that the theologian William Perkins “understood the chief case of conscience” as one of “sorrow attended by despair, doubt, and the absence of assurance of election. In his extensive pastoral practice,” Rubin notes, Perkins “recognized that this greatest distress of mind—despair—brought self-condemnation,” and that it could even (in Perkins’s words) come “at length to desperation, if it be not cured” (37).

Like Rubin’s book, Robert N. Watson’s *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* provides a helpful overview of crises of faith in William Shakespeare’s era, especially during the reign of King James I. Watson, though, focuses more on creative writers than on theologians. He argues that there is much evidence, during this period, of crises of faith so deep that people doubted the very existence of life after death. “Despite its ferocious displays of Christian conviction,” Watson contends, “Jacobean culture struggled with the suspicion that death was a complete and permanent annihilation of the self, not merely some latency of the body awaiting Last Judgment” (3). Although Watson concedes that “it is certainly risky to project Existentialist anxieties back onto a Renaissance culture that

had a very different way of understanding its universe,” he argues that “only a facile and even patronizing reading of human psychology, as well as an incomplete reading of the historical record, can insist that Renaissance minds were incapable of registering the fear of personal annihilation” (4). Relying on varying kinds of evidence, he argues that “the traditional assumption that Jacobeans would automatically have believed in an afterlife is at best an exaggeration” (28).

Whether or not crises of faith, and doubts about some kind of immortality, were as widespread in the English Renaissance as Watson assumes, they seem to have become increasingly common during the so-called long eighteenth century, which is often roughly dated from 1660 to 1800. For example, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson*, by Charles E. Pierce Jr., deals explicitly with the crises of faith suffered by the great eighteenth-century sage. Pierce argues that “Johnson’s notations in his private journals” in the early 1760s make clear that “he was more deeply afflicted than ever before by religious doubt” (144). Yet Pierce concludes that Johnson, partly through reading the works of theologian Richard Baxter “reaffirmed his faith, . . . and had regained his conviction that life meant most when conducted in the spirit of Christian truths” (144).

Crises of faith seem to have become even more widespread once the romantic period began in the early nineteenth century. R. L. Brett’s *Faith and Doubt: Religion and Secularisation in Literature from Wordsworth to Larkin* deals with many authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Philip Larkin. Brett’s title, however, is somewhat misleading, because his chapters usually focus on the writers’ general ideas about literature, without specifically or consistently focusing on their religious ideas. His book does explore Wordsworth and Coleridge’s crises of faith about the French Revolution (which both at first supported), but it lacks detailed discussion about crises of faith in the works of such significant doubters as Arnold and Tennyson.

Readers interested in discussion of these kinds of crises will find Hoxie Neale Fairchild's six-volume *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (covering 1700–1965) more helpful. The sections on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century English and American writers are particularly useful. Fairchild also explores the *evolution* of writers' religious attitudes, and his detailed indexes are especially worth consulting. When discussing the eighteenth century, however, he reports few examples of real crises of faith. Instead he shows that Christians chose to adapt their beliefs to conform to their own instincts—a tendency that made crises of faith less likely. This tendency, though, also resulted in real disagreement about fundamental tenets of the faith by people who all claimed to be followers of Christ. Fairchild wittily notes, for instance, that Blake managed to persuade “himself that he [was] the only genuine Christian extant in the year 1793. Everyone else [had] made a serious mistake” (3: 98).

As Fairchild proceeds into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he finds significant numbers of crises of faith. He sees a fundamental conflict, in the literature of those eras, between the impulse toward individuality and the impulse to worship God. He argues that romanticism, which he thinks derived ultimately from Protestant impulses, was one of many factors that promoted the rise of individualism. Although Fairchild focuses on various crises of faith in Wordsworth's life, concerning not only the French Revolution but also political and religious ideas and thoughts about nature and man, he also notes that as both Wordsworth and Coleridge grew older they became increasingly orthodox in their religious views.

Fairchild also discusses Percy Bysshe Shelley's atheism and Lord Byron's skepticism, calling the latter “a doubter who found no satisfaction in his doubt” (3: 435). He writes that John Keats's “literary career presents only a few fleeting, inconsistent, and uncertain indications of thoughts or feelings which the haziest mind could describe as religious,” and he suggests that Keats's “skepticism included his own unbelief” (3: 498, 501). While Fairchild provides significant

information about the religious views of romantic authors, he suggests that the romantics were less concerned about crises in Christianity than they were about exploring alternatives to orthodox Christian attitudes.

The Victorian period provides Fairchild fertile ground for exploring significant crises of faith. He calls various (mostly lesser-known) poets “subjectivists” who can “neither firmly repudiate God nor firmly believe in His objective reality” (4: 64). But he also sees such a major figure as Tennyson as an advocate of “honest doubt” who “loves the spirit of Christianity” even though he “hates many of the dogmas” (4: 105). “From boyhood to old age,” he claims, Tennyson “was quite as much a doubter as a believer” (4: 116).

Fairchild sees Browning as more religious (and less focused on himself) than Tennyson (4: 139), but he quotes many examples of religious despair in the works of such writers as Arthur Symonds (4: 387), Edward FitzGerald (4: 425–27), and James Thomson (4: 457–58, 470–71). He argues that for Arnold the “loss of God is a tragedy not in itself, but in its consequences for intellectual, emotional, and ethical clarity and vitality” (4: 479). He also writes of Arthur Clough: “What tortures him is the difficulty of knowing what the Truth is” (4: 507). By 1880, according to Fairchild, it had become harder for many Victorian writers “to feel sure that anything was really true” (4: 539). In most cases, he suggests, these crises of faith resulted far more from doubts about religion’s claims of truth than from any ardent atheism.

Unlike the writers preceding them, the Victorians are so relevant to the study of the crisis of faith in English and American culture that no one interested in this issue can afford to ignore them, and no brief summary of scholarship on Victorian crises of faith can do the subject justice. Nevertheless, a particularly useful book on crises of faith during this period is Giles St Aubyn’s *Souls in Torment: The Conflict between Science and Religion in Victorian England*, though the title fails to do justice to the book’s impressive comprehensiveness. St Aubyn provides significant detail on the multitude of causes of Victorian crises of religious faith. Among the causes he explores are increasing disgust

with the perceived harshness of Calvin's teachings (20, 188, 249); skepticism encouraged by Protestantism in general (23–26); growth of rationalism and political radicalism (29–33); anticlericalism (33, 192); and bad examples set by the clergy (54). These problems were compounded by a rising frustration with the institutionalized church and its various shortcomings (54–58) and by tendencies to associate the Christian church with the ruling classes in an age of growing democracy (56–60). People also developed a sense of the limited nature of human understanding (72–75). Also important in the rise of religious doubt was a growing trust in science and its achievements (71–73) as well as the rise of romanticism (75–77).

Other reasons for crises of faith in the Victorian period, according to St Aubyn, included the increasing numbers of debates and fundamental disagreements among Christians themselves (105–7, 147–48) as well as frustration with the guilt that many evangelicals tried to foster in people—a guilt that many resisted (117). These factors also coincided with the rise of agnosticism (158–61) and a burgeoning skepticism about the reliability of the Bible—a skepticism based in part on the rise of sophisticated study of scripture, including its many inconsistencies (173–74, 180, 248–49, 304–5, 337–40). Crises of faith also sometimes resulted from a rising interest in non-Christian religions, especially as the British Empire grew and people discovered diverse foreign cultures (181, 191–92, 270, 356–61). History also became more and more a serious discipline and provided information about different peoples and faiths, especially in non-European parts of the world (180, 290–93).

Crises of faith also occurred, according to St Aubyn, as some people began to consider the God of the Bible cruel and immoral. They focused particularly on his judgmental, even vindictive behavior in the Old Testament, especially in his treatment of non-Hebrew cultures, but also on the idea of predestined damnation and eternal punishment (182, 211–59). There were also growing doubts about the veracity of biblical “miracles” (47–51, 180, 515–18) as well as a growing sense of the ways discoveries in modern geology contradicted biblical narratives

(180–82, 441–53). Debates about such conflicts were often exacerbated by the rigidity of the orthodox (192, 271–72), which helped lead to diminishment in the power of the official church (101–5, 133–36, 193–94). The church also lost some of its social influence simply because of the rising popularity of alternatives to churchgoing, such as attendance at sporting events (198). Finally, St Aubyn shows how growing doubts about immortality (202–4) as well as the rise of Darwinism (454–508) also contributed to Victorian crises of faith.

St Aubyn importantly claims, however, that Darwinism did not in fact lead many of the most important Victorian doubters into their uncertainties. Instead, in many cases, he asserts, their crises of faith mostly began *before* the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (196–97). Doubts about the veracity of the Bible, combined with arguments among Christians themselves, were often far more important factors in generating crises of faith than was the influence of Darwin. Yet St Aubyn notes that while “there are many conflicting accounts of what caused” some “Victorians to abandon Christianity, one thing remains certain: most found the process excruciatingly painful” (199; see also 200–205). Victorians often compared crises of faith to earthquakes (208). St Aubyn's book stands as one of the most exhaustive studies of the multiple reasons for crises of faith during the Victorian period. Paradoxically, however, he additionally notes that this period was also a particularly religious era in English history. Whether as skeptics or as believers, many people took religion quite seriously indeed.

Another book on the Victorians that is still very helpful is J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*, which discusses Thomas De Quincey, Browning, Emily Brontë, Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The chapters on Arnold and Hopkins are particularly important. Miller states that for Arnold, “the responsibility of man in a time when God is absent is to keep the void open for God's return” (262). He writes of Hopkins that although Hopkins “wavers neither in his faith nor in his vocation,” nevertheless “the

central religious experience of his last years is the prolonged anguish of spiritual paralysis, dryness of soul, the absence of God and the failure of grace” (352). Miller explains Hopkins’s crisis of faith as the “the most shattering experience of the disappearance of God” of any of his contemporaries (352–53). He writes that Hopkins, like so many Victorians, believed in God but was sometimes “unable to reach him. . . . He is left with a blind violence of will toward a God who keeps himself absent” (359).

D. Bruce Lockerbie’s book *Dismissing God: Modern Writers’ Struggle against Religion* picks up where Miller’s book ends. Lockerbie covers such authors as Arnold, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, FitzGerald, Algernon Swinburne, Thomas Hardy, Yeats, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. Lockerbie writes from an explicitly Christian point of view, and, as his book’s subtitle implies, he at times assumes that people who cannot believe in God are simply guilty of choosing not to believe “truths” that seem quite obvious to Lockerbie himself. Still, the book contains many helpful quotations and much objective commentary.

Nevertheless, Fairchild’s six-volume history of religious attitudes in English and American poetry is still probably the most helpful resource for studying crises of faith from 1700 to 1965. Fairchild covers many of the minor and major poets, and he provides lengthy quotations, so that his generalizations are almost always significantly supported by evidence from primary texts. His comments on the Victorians have already been discussed, and his research on poets of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century provides significant detail. His discussions of such writers as Wilfred Blunt (5: 66), Hopkins (5: 89), and Robert Frost are particularly helpful. He calls Frost “one of those innumerable thwarted romanticists of our century who can neither resolutely affirm the romantic faith in man nor resolutely abjure it in favor of faith in matter or faith in God” (5: 236). He describes Hardy, as well as the so-called Georgian poets (5:245,

372), much as he describes Frost. Fairchild calls the English poet Isaac Rosenberg, who wrote about World War I, “honest in his bewilderment,” commenting that Rosenberg “never claims to have found a fully satisfying substitute for the old sureness which he has rejected” (5: 516). Writing of the British “war poets” in general (such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen), Fairchild says that they “are deeply aware of their need of help but cannot believe in the possibility of obtaining it” (5: 594). He suggests that it was often frustration with the church that led many writers to doubt God (5: 597). He also argues that Owen regards Christ more as an ultimate symbol of human love than as a real deity (5: 598) and asserts that by 1920, “religious sensibility in English poetry” was “at a lower ebb” than ever before (5: 626).

While Fairchild’s volumes deal with religion specifically in English and American poetry, Charles I. Glicksberg’s *Modern Literature and the Death of God* seeks to explain crises of faith in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought and literature more generally. Glicksberg’s study includes insights on a wide sampling of writers, including Samuel Beckett, Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Graham Greene, Franz Kafka, André Gide, Søren Kierkegaard, Lawrence, Friedrich Nietzsche, Eugene O’Neill, Sartre, and various others. Writing in a quick, appealing style, Glicksberg brings together intellectual history, social and cultural history, and literary criticism to show how numerous writers and intellectuals struggled with matters of faith.

Glicksberg attributes these struggles to such influences as the Holocaust (7), the prospect of atomic war (7), the rise of existentialism (7), and an increasing loss of faith in immortality (8, 67). He also ascribes doubts about religion to the growth of “scientific rationalism” (10), the absence of any source of trustworthy belief (17), the “growing process of secularization” (18), and an increasing sense that faith is irrational (21). He describes the latter idea as a loss of “faith in the possibility of faith” (23). This loss, he thinks, coincided with (and in some cases also resulted from) the rise of nihilism (33) and alienation (36), a suspicion that there might be no secure sources of love (36), and, at least in some

people, actual defiance of God (42). Glicksberg also shows a rising sense of meaninglessness among many people (68), a loss of faith in simple interpretations of behavior (86), and a growing appeal of suicide as a method of defiance (91). According to Glicksberg, “what the writers of our age hunger for is a ‘religion’ that will make their life meaningful, though they do not equate this ‘religious’ yearning” with Christianity (150).

Glicksberg’s *Literature of Commitment* provides further insights into modern crises of faith. It deals with the politics of twentieth-century writers, especially Europeans, including (in some cases) their crises of political faith. For example, Glicksberg investigates the disillusionment felt by many early believers in communism in general and in the Soviet Union in particular (246, 285). He also explores other modern crises of faith, including the loss of confidence by artists, writers, and intellectuals in their own social significance (12–13). These doubts often coincided with loss of faith in personal creativity if an artist felt obliged to follow a party line (30) as well as a loss of confidence in one’s own identity (135). Glicksberg also explores a loss of faith in “moral absolutes” or in any kind of propositional truth (143) as well as the loss of faith in faith itself of any kind (244). Similar issues are also explored in Glicksberg’s *Literature of Nihilism*. Glicksberg is one of the most helpful scholars of crises of faith in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, covering developments not only in British and American writings but also in writings from continental Europe.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. Jonathan Wright is responsible for the first half of this article (covering the periods up to the beginning of the nineteenth century); Jeff Moody is responsible for everything thereafter.
2. Our thanks to Robert C. Evans for his guidance concerning the texts discussed in this chapter and for help in editing.

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