Neil Miller Gunn: A Spiritual Survey

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I

In Paul Cézanne's paintings, as is often pointed out, the highlighted plane is surrounded by dark planes which make endless recession into the profound distances of pictorial space. As in Cézanne's paintings, so in Neil Miller Gunn's works. The highlighted factual description is ever surrounded by the description of the innermost part of his mind—that immense depth which is beyond words or reasoning, deeper than the stir of thought and nearer to the source of his life.

Once we begin reading his factual description, we are swallowed up in the endless, seemingly spontaneous flow of ingenious vigorous expressions. We are absorbed. We are under his enchantment at the breath-taking masterful narration of outward or inward happenings, such as the terrific night storm in The Lost Glen (pp. 70–71) or the heart-rending emotional scene between Dark Mairi of the Shore and the Soft Eilidh in The Butcher's Broom (pp. 172–73).

We remain entranced at his narration, our whole attention being riveted to his words. When our excitement, however enormous, calms down, there dawns upon our mind his distinctive mentality, to wit, his extraordinary penetration.

In Hidden Doors (pp. 186–88), he speaks of invisible musical doors in various composers' works, unexpected hidden doors like a low door in a wall that runs by a weary street, through which he is led into the world beyond. But it is not in musical compositions alone that he finds hidden doors. He finds them in everything. He enters the world beyond and perceives something deep-seated where ordinary persons see nothing.

When he sees birds of passage winging their way overhead, he will sense the strange palpitating urge in their breasts (Hidden
Doors, p. 105). And when he sees a sheep’s face, he will see through to its pining heart.

Even in a flock of sheep on these hills there is a piner. He stares with a white face and one sees in a moment that he has no concern with eating and has something different in him from all the other sheep.

He senses forlornness in the far barking of a dog and the urgent calling of the remote memories or instincts in human breasts (Hidden Doors, p. 51). When he hears a piper playing a joyful tune in a ceilidh in the Highland glen, he will hear something more than the sounding music.

But others felt it as the sadness that is beyond joy, the deep sweet sadness for that which will never be caught or will never be born. (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 62)

And, hearing a sound, his ear will catch the crying heart of the sound.

Through the sound of the burn she heard, upon her right, the surge of the wind in the birch leaves. Caught in the centre of these sounds was a small cry that was not a real cry so much as the crying heart of the sounds themselves. (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 130)

He knows the meaning and the nature of silence as we see from the following quotations:

Into the silence creeps gradually a listening stillness. (Hidden Doors, p. 51)

There was complete silence everywhere. But now they both knew that the silence was empty. (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 32)

She remained quite still. She had meant to talk, in some way to express her spirit, to lash him with it if need be: she actually had not said a word. (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 314)

He harkened to the silence beyond all sound, before sound was, before music was even a dream. (The Well at the World’s End, p. 166)

And he hears a voiceless voice:

Her silence was a suppressed cry which he almost heard. (The Silver Bough, p. 57)

Silently she said, “Davie.” (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 314)

Likewise he senses the meaning of the nothing.

The low music might have formed of itself in the heart of the evening. It meant nothing. It was intolerable. (Sun Circle, p. 119)
"He did not look like a man who saw nothing." "That's the point. He really saw nothing. Haven't you got it yet?" "Perhaps there was something in the nothing." (The Well at the World's End, p. 76)

"Did you hear anything?" "I heard something," But nothing came to the door—and nothing knocked. (The Well at the World's End, p. 76)

It is one of those luxurious editions of the works of an old master, but as I turned over the pages I became disturbed by an element other than the novelty or strangeness of what was portrayed, by an element that wasn't as it were in the picture at all but yet was there—if only I could uncover it. (Saltire Review, Vol. 6, No. 23 (Winter 1961), pp. 45-46)

When he deals with a fact, he will get at the heart of the fact and will know its ultimate meaning, as Dark Mairi of the Shore does (The Butcher's Broom, p. 59). And when there occurs something whose hidden meaning is not clearly grasped, it will become a sign. Sign is the fulfillment of the desire to get at the concealed meaning, as, for example, the episode in Sun Circle where Breata while passing through the forest with Col, sees a small red dog come out of the ferns, pause and then slide back into them. Unable to see the incident's meaning it becomes a sign to her with the full meaning to be revealed later by the old woman of Koorich. Or again, "Kirsty seemed to be listening with her glistening imaginative eyes. She swallowed hard, and said in a haunted tone: 'Mother, do you think it was a sign?'" (Morning Tide, p. 65)

Seemingly, for Mr. Gunn, the world beyond is the more important. But it refuses access to rational reasoning. It eludes analysis or division, rationalization or theorization. Indeed it cannot be cleared up in words. It is beyond words, beyond theories, and beyond thoughts:

Yet there was that realm. They could not see it, they knew nothing about it, yet they were conscious of being in it. It was like the silence he had listened to on the hilltop above the Picts Houses, a silence that was more than an absence of sound. The mind knew this; the mind found something other than the silence; yet would not have found it except in that particular silence. At the lowest, it had the suggestion of exploration, of going into a realm beyond. (The Well at the World's End, p. 95)

Confidential, friendly, thinking thoughts beyond the words, and prepared in some region of his own to move, when the time came, with a ruthless thoroughness. (The Well at the World's End, p. 84)

There was a knowledge beyond reason. It was not to be looked at, questions had no meaning. Things happened. (Blood Hunt, p. 152)
Since rational method cannot be applied, some other means has to be resorted to. Penetration is the word used by Mr. Gunn. He prizes penetration:

Remarkable that Cocklebuster should have penetration so deeply into the music. (The Well at the World's End, p. 168)

He might not have the power of his father, but his penetration was finer and clearer. (Sun Circle, p. 111)

... he met Lachlan's face that read his own before he spoke. (The Well at the World's End, p. 85)

What really matters is to get into this region beyond. Words, thoughts, and theories are often only stumbling blocks in the way.

... man evolved by seeing things in a new way. Artists who mattered have never believed anything else ... Thoughts, words—let him give them a rest for heaven's sake and enjoy the moment as it came. Hang theories! (The Well at the World's End, pp. 101-2)

Looking upon this ardent coloured world he forgot himself and thought of nothing. (The Well at the World's End, p. 102)

Apropos, it is in the affairs of this region beyond that the Gaels excel others. But, on this very account, they are often misrepresented or even slandered as ignorant or superstitious. And maybe some of them are ignorant of what is called civilization or of the world where reason alone reigns, but they are never ignorant of the world beyond, or a swirl below the surface of a bottomless pool. On the other hand, those who pride themselves upon the knowledge of civilization may be quite ignorant of the world beyond, of that something which is in the nothing:

"It's superstition that's wrong wi' ye, pure superstition—... Ye should gang oot intae the world an' see a bit o' civilisation for a change," suggested Davie. "Some of us have seen a good bit of the world," replied Lachlan with a slow thoughtfulness. "But there's another world, and when it comes knocking on your door some night—you'll know it then." (The Well at the World's End, p. 67)

... here was a dimension of being alive under the surface, where the characters moved like people under a spell, and the darkness was another kind of light. The compulsion under which they moved was quite fatal. (The Well at the World's End, p. 68)

... he thought he might as well go through the boundary of superstition as any other, for who knew what strange revelation might not be on the other side. (The Well at the World's End, p. 73)
"All this talk about our superstitions and fancies—it's merely talk, as you ought to know by this time." (Hidden Doors, p. 180)

Thus Mr. Gunn is concerned with the world beyond and has tried to give expression to it. He says,

I might even have tried to deal with this land, this very beautiful land, the Highlands; have tried to show a manner of life, a humanism, concerned not with the outward show of material aggrandisement, but with the inward affairs of the spirit, as in poetry and music and good manners, in vanities and jealousies and strife, in a certain vividness, divine or diabolical, of the personal spirit. (Second Sight, p. 236)

II

Mr. Gunn sees into the inner realm of everything, but his penetration goes deeper when he deals with man. And he values one's unthinking self and its workings far more highly than one's thinking self, for they are beyond reason and nearer the source of life:

To move her out of her unthinking self seemed to expose her, to show that apart from what she was unthinkingly she was very little. (The Butcher's Broom, p. 9)

Yet he held off—as he fancied he saw the girl herself hold off. And he did not know why he did this. (The Butcher's Broom, p. 83)

He did not indeed know what he wanted. He was, however, extremely urgent, and there was no trace of smile or fun on his face now. (The Butcher's Broom, p. 85)

... Elie held the look, then moved by an impulse so deep that it lifted her out of all the self she knew. ... (The Butcher's Broom, p. 91)

Only the mother had any hope left, and it was hardly hope so much as a blind surging effort to give warmth back to the cold body. (The Silver Darlings, p. 520)

She called from the deeps of her spirit to her son, pouring her life into him. (The Silver Darlings, p. 520)

Yet nothing was dead and she herself was alive, recording life in death, this strange pattern of emotion and action, existing no one knew why, catching the body and soul into its whirl, throwing them aside, for no reason that anyone could think of—perhaps for no reason at all. (The Butcher's Broom, p. 292)

Mr. Gunn values those deeds done out of the internal urge of one's hidden self, surging up from the centre of the warmth of life.
In *Blood Hunt* he describes Allan's and Elizabeth Murison's deeds with astonishingly strong sympathy, for they are hard pressed for their conduct whose motives lie in the region beyond thoughts, beyond words. And he gives us the detailed account of the workings of Sandy's hidden self. Now, this hidden self is at once personal and racial. At this living root of the self, there exists no barrier between one another.

Ewan's thought stilled to ultimate vision where he saw his spirit as the spirit of his people. (*The Lost Glen*, p. 338)

Their natural selves emerged untrammeled and heightened. There were no barriers here, nor consciousness of barrier. (*The Butcher's Broom*, p. 288)

Do people, ordinary folk, ever stand tranced before some wonder that not only takes their breath away, but, for an instant, the human boundary itself away? (*The Well at the World's End*, p. 20)

Peter could neither move nor speak; he felt the boundary growing thin.

"I am a married man," said the shepherd, "with three of a young family and though I say it myself I know when I am well off. But—I didn't want to go home."

There was no boundary. (*The Well at the World's End*, p. 65)

This is ultimate. "... through countless generations the ultimates have been caught by these women in legend and poem and music known to them as intimately as their breath." (*The Butcher's Broom*, p. 284)

And Mr. Gunn's penetration goes still more deeply when he probes into his own self. He looks searchingly into his own mind. And his contemplation on his inner self is given in detail in *The Atom of Delight*, but his basic idea is already seen in his earlier works:

So that he was aware of his illness as of something a little apart, as far apart, say, as the burning sheath from this inner central certainty of the mind, which was his real self, his thinking self, with its amazing, inexhaustible power of precise imagery. (*Hidden Doors*, p. 38)

And the picture he saw was of the Master abstracting himself from the second person, or son, and withdrawing as a ghost, withdrawing and going afar off, his true spirit, his final self, his holy ghost, going further into regions of stillness, until he came to the centre, and there he stood with eternity about him in a circle of light. (*Sun Circle*, p. 114)

This idea of real self is expressed more fully in *Second Sight*:

You get away from everyone, not purposely or by desire, but by what
seems an unlucky chance, and then suddenly you find you have wandered right into yourself, and there you are standing upright, amused and pleased at finding yourself alone. (p. 49)

A fellow can be so long away from himself that he loses the feeling of being an individual and in the round. (p. 49)

The "ah-h-h" of wonder, of drowsiness, of being impersonally alive; wariness forgotten, the everyday self gone, and the happier, simpler self come up to take the air. All life had been a training to get him away from that diviner self. (p. 139)

This diviner self is called "the second self" in The Atom of Delight, and therein is told how he came upon himself while sitting on a boulder in the river flowing through Dunbeath strath. (The Atom of Delight, p. 29) In the previously mentioned works Mr. Gunn has been talking from his life experiences, but in The Atom of Delight, becoming more speculative than empirical, perhaps desirous to develop his idea, he introduces the notion of psychic stuff which pervades the universe. (The Atom of Delight, pp. 70-72)

Thus he claims the close spiritual relationship between ourselves and all things in the universe; in other words, the widespread existence, or spacelessness, of spirit.

Next, he proceeds to show us how in our inner selves is laid up the vast store of the life experiences of our ancestors in prehistoric as well as historic times. All the life experiences of our ancestors in the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, the Neo-, Meso-, and Paleo-lithic Age, and the more ancient ages, will surge back and motivate us. Thus is established the timelessness of our inner selves.

In Highland River, Kenn, upon seeing the king of the fish in the stream on a frosty morning, hears the knocking of his forefathers at the door of his mind, and rushes forward to capture the king. (Highland River, p. 8)

Mr. Gunn knows that not only humans are motivated by the ancestral life experiences. The same is true for other creatures. In The Grey Coast, Roy, the shepherd collie, shows affection and obedience to Maggie, but his master Jeems's "Sst!" will bring him to heel. For the collie understands wild hare hunting is afoot. Roy inwardly hears the haunting echoes from prehistoric partnership between the dog and man. It is the call of his ancestors to follow in their steps. (The Grey Coast, p. 65)
Man's life is determined not only by his own life experiences, but also by his ancestors' experiences:

Then as the old woman's speaking voice began to pass into a rhythmic chant, something seemed to pierce him from sources beyond the experience of his little life. . . . (The Butcher's Broom, p. 173)

For Mairi knew that no circumstances, however it may affect action or response, ever alters the essential nature of a human being. (The Butcher's Broom, p. 186)

Naturally Mr. Gunn has a high regard for ancestors and their activities, especially for their cultural activities. He adds a peculiar sense of sadness—a sadness that comes from their cultures having been created so long ago.

All that has been bred of the Human Spirit for untold generations is interwoven in this web, subtly interwoven, so that something of intangible sadness which films vision comes of a sense of human things forgone. . . . (Hidden Doors, p. 51)

And now this sense of forgone human activity touched the mood of the place with something inexplicably heroic.

One could have sat and got lost in the sea's rhythm and had the feel of ebb and flow in far-off human things, the far-off things that yet are near as one's own emotions and as poignant, with a subtle touching of strange human chords and sudden visualisings of figures moving in and out the grey web of their destiny. (Hidden Doors, pp. 170-71)

The old things—they can't get spoil, and they don't give a damn about wanting to be visited. Only, even there you have the puritanical, covenanting innovations of John Knox. The frost of Calvinism is on much of the Outer Isles here like a blight. But thank your stars a lot of the old stuff, the old genuine stuff, has escaped. (Hidden Doors, pp. 183-84)

Needless to say that the cultures which have lasted from ancient times and still have an unconditional urgency in determining the present-day Highlanders' way of life are the Gaelic cultures.

III

Mr. Gunn is a Gael. He has inherited the racial cultural bequest of eternal significance, and has a haunting memory of the racial past going back as far as the Stone Age and beyond.

The Gael is a subfamily of the Celts distinguished for their artistic sense, abstruse metaphysics, high standard of morality, and fortitude in life. Their artistic sense is manifest in their Hallstat and
La Tène Cultures of the early and late Iron Ages, their superiority clearly seen in the remains of metal works. Their metaphysics were never written down in manuscripts, but they can be induced from their legends, folktales and songs. Their morality is evinced in their manners and customs as well as in their literary works. Their fortitude is well exemplified in the deeds of Vercingetorix who defended the Celtic realms against the onslaught of Julius Caesar's military forces.

The first colonists to Alba came from the Continent in the Meso-lithic Age, that is, 2500 B.C., and they lived by hunting and fishing. Farmers came in the Neo-lithic Age, bringing new kinds of cereals and agricultural implements. Then in the Bronze Age, new colonists came in three waves—the first from the Low Countries into the northeast of Scotland, the second from the Rhineland into the region of the Forth, and the third from the southern Russian plains into the Aberdeen area. This last group is particularly interesting, because they might have been in touch with the ancient Oriental civilisation.

When Mr. Gunn speaks of his ancestors' prehistoric life experiences, he may be seeing, in his mind's eye, these prehistoric hunters roaming through the Caledonian primeval forests after red deer, or fishers casting nets for herring or haddock in the Western seas, or, in his imagination, he may be listening to the footsteps of these ancient farmers plodding on the fields along the river basins.

He seems to entertain a strong sense of kinship with these people and highly values their life experiences, placing much emphasis on the meanings derived from them:

On the one hand teaching kids: on the other, the land, the sea, the struggle with elemental forces, the pitting of strength to strength in the old hazard of life, the raw stuff out of which all poetry, all legend, is woven. (The Grey Coast, p. 41)

I think it is a pity that all that old way of looking at life has passed. There was a slow richness in it—and poetry. (The Grey Coast, p. 44)

For these half-clad, bare-foot, starving peasants inherited a culture from a past so remote that its mythology was as real to them as was Greek mythology to the Athenians. But they not only inherited it, they practiced it, and that in its highest manifestation—poetry and music—and found therein their only, their last, solace. (Whisky and Scotland, pp. 65-66)

From these ancient people there has come down till today their
tradition in the way of life and culture, making the Gaels distinct from the other races. What then is the most essential Gaelic trait? Let us turn to Mr. Gunn and listen to his words:

Was not that the place that his race had come out of? And was it not the spirit that his race had forever been concerned with? Not matter, not grubbing, not success, not “getting on,” but the play and the sparkle of the spirit in music and fun and work in the open? (The Last Glen, p. 47)

This is of the utmost importance. The Gaels' natural principle, or original tendency, is spirituality.

It is the same spirit, concerned with the things of the mind, and excited by them. (Whisky and Scotland, p. 73)

This is the very spring of their conduct. They share others' thoughts and emotions, and enter into intimate spiritual relationships with others. This is absolute, and has nothing to do with intellect or thought.

Mr. Gunn's works are the highest manifestation of this Gaelic soul. The characters in his works all act according to this absolute Gaelic nature. This is the ultimate source of Mr. Gunn's extraordinary power to arouse our strong sympathies.

We see how moving in Butcher's Broom is Old Angus's warm attitude to David in the darkness behind the barn, and how touching is Dark Mairi's tenderness toward Eilidh who came back to her door, taking little Collin by the hand, after years of unutterable hardships and tribulations. We are overwhelmed, words are smothered, by the warmthness of these people. Here the essential Gael speaks out in Mr. Gunn. Whatever happens, these words will not pass away. No, never.

The Gaels turn to the earth in the same spirit. Their mental attitude is clearly seen in the many notes on country life contained in Highland Pack. They do not look at the earth with the greed of exploitation, but with deep feelings of kinship and peace:

His old body responded to the old earth, earth to earth, mystery to mystery, humour to humour. (The Grey Coast, p. 73)

And presently there came upon her a merging sense of oneness with the elements upon her. (The Grey Coast, p. 127)

Even the land itself could dream its own inexpressible dreams, once it was free of the day's slavery and the dealings of men. (The Grey Coast, p. 229)
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How deliciously responsive the convalescent body to this great old earth. (The Lost Glen, p. 80)

Perhaps the most ancient expression of this Gaelic affinity with the earth is “Miann A Bhaird Aosda” in Sar-Obair nam Bard Gaelach; or The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry, and Lives of the Highland Bards (pp. 14–16) compiled by John Mackenzie. (In English the poem is entitled “The Aged Bard’s Wish”; the volume mentioned is a collection of Gaelic poetry first published in Glasgow in 1841 and several times reprinted.) Mr. Gunn makes a quotation in The Butcher’s Broom: “Behind the Aged Bard was the eternal earth and over it the sun. In instinct and in heart they delighted and worshiped here.” (p. 57)

When in dire distress and unbearable misery, the Gaels will go to the earth and find their solace there. Both Maggie in The Grey Coast and Eilidh in The Butcher’s Broom go to the hollow and get the stupor of the earth:

Something of this misery and stupor of the earth was with her when, in the first of the dusk, she crept shivering from that den and went down toward the hollow by the wood. Yet the earth in its stupor had a strange liberating quality; a mindlessness, an end. (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 101)

Sometimes these emotions grew beyond enduring and the body for relief could have stalked on great legs and stretched its arms to the sky, crying, crying, and scattering the stars; but more often, it curled over like a boulder and cried into the earth. . . . (The Butcher’s Broom, p. 397)

He was being born to the earth, to the mother that is behind all mothers, as the sea, the father, is behind all fathers. But deeper the earth and darker, more mysterious and fertile, secretive and vivid, red under the dark, instinct under reason, eternity under time. There is a movement on the surface of waters, but there is a pulse at the heart of the earth. (Morning Tide, p. 156)

Presumably, this spiritual relationship with the earth may have something to do with the worship of the Mother Earth which is said to have existed among the ancient Continental Celts.

Mr. Gunn touches upon various other features of the Gaelic life, customs, and cultures, such as Second Sight, Ceór Mór, and Tir Nan Og, and his interpretations are always fascinating, for they show his deep insight into their essential qualities. Being a distinguished fiddler himself, he shows keen appreciation when he talks
about Gaelic tunes, such as Patrick Mór MacCrimmon’s “Lament For Children.”

He holds the Gaelic language in great reverence and in Butcher’s Broom (p. 14) comments: “In truth it is an immensely old tongue, and a thousand years before Mairi it was richer in its knowledge, wider in its range, and was given to metaphysics and affairs of state.”

Although he does not write in Gaelic he sometimes employs Gaelic words, mostly in a dialogue. Perhaps it is to give a Highlandish tone to the dialogue:

Och, och, la preea!

Hey flooch! (The Lost Glen, p. 132)

La preea may be là bréagh, a fine day; flooch may be fliuch, wet or damp.

They had looked on the dark wind and seen the hosting of the sidhe! (The Lost Glen, p. 332)

He had never bowed knowingly before the Lords of Silence nor listened on the wind to the hosting of the sidhe, nor had centaurs ever haunted mountain ranges and leapt vast chasms in dim hinterlands of strange seashores. (Hidden Doors, p. 46)

Sidhe may be sideadh, a blast, or sitheadh, force.

Then you would never come back, Cha till e tuille, never more. (Back Home, p. 25)

Here Cha till translates as will not come back; e, as he; and tuille, as more.

Lennan mo chrhidhe to o, till, a leannain. (The Grey Coast, p. 267)

Lennan may be leannan, a lover or a sweetheart; till, means to come back; a leannain, is a vocative form of leannan.

Gaelic phrases are seldom used, but the phrases which sound like literal translations of Gaelic idiomatic expressions are abundantly used. To give a few instances, “be in it” is the translation of the Gaelic idiom “tha ann,” which literally means “be in it,” but is used to denote the existence of something:

Is it yourself, Hugh, that’s in it? (Morning Tide, p. 15)

“Ay, man” he said, “it’s no’ a bad night, after all the rain there’s been in it.” (The Grey Coast, p. 5)
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They wouldn't get up so early with the snow in it. *(Hidden Doors, p. 85)*

She said, "It's a fine day that's in it." *(Hidden Doors, p. 156)*

Then that man (or woman) might say in greeting, "It's the fine day that's in it. . . ." *(The Butcher's Broom, p. 13)*

"Long, long ago," said Bardan, crouching on his stick, "there was no sea in it at all." *(Sun Circle, p. 108)*

That's all that's in it. *(Sun Circle, p. 135)*

"That's that" may be taken as a literal translation of the Gaelic idiom "Sin, sin," meaning that's that, which is employed to express the idea that it is enough:

Well, Maggie, that's that. *(The Grey Coast, p. 22)*

"Well, that's that," she said in a voice that astonished her by its evenness. *(The Grey Coast, p. 121)*

"Well, that's that!" said Tullach. *(The Grey Coast, p. 159)*

Mr. Gunn often uses the literal translation of the Gaelic prepositional pronouns, such as orm, ort, air, orra, oirrn, oirbh, orra, which mean respectively on me, on you, on him, on her, on us, on you, and on them. Often these imply "to the disadvantage of":

Collin explained to Mairi that he had been going up to see the ponies behind the wood and that now he had better go or it would be dark on him. *(The Butcher's Broom, p. 25)*

"I am just coming in on you!" apologised Maggie. *(The Grey Coast, p. 88)*

I thought it was coming on him heavy last night. *(Hidden Doors, p. 85)*

"It's no' right," he said, "on ye." *(The Grey Coast, p. 8)*

I don't know what it's all coming to. It's poor enough on them an' theirs. *(The Grey Coast, p. 232)*

"That's certain," acknowledged Jeems. "It's hard on every one the same." *(The Grey Coast, p. 232)*

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