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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/51c2k718>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/T891034266

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Foreign Means to Local Ends: Bialik, Emerson, and the Uses of America in 1920s Palestine

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“We will not rely on the New and so we walk ever with
reverted eyes, like those monsters who look backwards.”

——Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous
Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1838–1842*

“Israel can look forward to a glorious past.”

——Yigael Yadin, the IDF’s second Chief of Staff and a
noted archeologist, on excavating
the site at Masada (apocryphal)

In the beginning of 1926, Haim Nachman Bialik, the premier poet and leading intellectual light of the Zionist movement, sailed for New York on a five-month long fundraising mission on behalf of the *yishuv*, the pre-statehood Jewish settlement in Palestine. He undertook the transatlantic voyage not without some trepidation. While eager for a firsthand impression of the young and prosperous Jewish American community,¹ he confessed on the eve of his departure to having always found the idea of America “somewhat terrifying.”² He was also unsure of his hosts and the reception that would await him on his arrival. The latter worry, at least, proved unfounded. New York’s Jewish community welcomed Bialik and his wife with unbridled enthusiasm and much fanfare, as befits the man described by *The New York Times* as “the poet-laureate of the Jewish people.”³ One hundred Jewish leaders accompanied by a band sailed on a snowy February morning to meet his liner, the *SS Mauretania*, on Swinburne Island.⁴ The next day, three thousand were in attendance at his first public appearance at the Mecca Temple in midtown Manhattan, while a thousand more remained outside in the

cold.⁵ Following a succession of distinguished speakers, including Stephen Wise and Louis Lipsky,⁶ the poet nervously took to the stage to deliver his first address on American soil, urging his audience, in Yiddish, to open their hearts and wallets to the cause of rebuilding the Jewish homeland.

Though the Jewish community and the business of fund-raising consumed the majority of Bialik's densely packed stay, he nevertheless managed to catch glimpses of the larger American scene, which left him with powerful, if mixed, impressions. The American metropolis clearly overwhelmed the poet. Evidently, nothing in his experiences of Odessa, Warsaw, Berlin, or London had prepared him for the sensorial onslaught of 1920s New York, which he later described in an evocative poem as a living hell, a "nest of Satan."⁷ At the same time, the tour, which passed through twenty-one cities, including Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, and Louisville,⁸ seemed to have converted this European man of Hebraist letters to a more favorable view of the "land of unlimited possibility."⁹ America, he announced to the thousands who had congregated in Tel Aviv's Beit Ha'am to welcome him upon his return to Palestine,¹⁰ had "crossed some kind of threshold, entered into a [new] atmosphere of possibilities and conceptions."¹¹ It was the birthplace, he told his audience in Palestine, of a *tipus hadash shel ben-adam*, "a new type of human being" (95).

Such Emersonianisms recur frequently in Bialik's 1926 speech in Tel Aviv, making his account of American culture striking not so much for its originality as for its familiarity. The words may be Hebrew, but the key tropes of the American myth are all there. Bialik marvels at the "naturalness" and "beauty" of the "pure and smooth-browed" American Adam: a healthy-minded materialist of "simple genius" (97), who "can do as his heart desires, for there is nothing there to stop him" (95). In America, Bialik informs his listeners (unknowingly channeling Crèvecoeur), men shed the "pain of inheritance, habits, customs and manners that bind a person to his [native] place," and fall back on all that is "elementary and elemental" in human nature (95). Free of "inhibitions whose source is in the past," Americans work strictly for the present and the future, in a "fever of physical expansion" (96).¹² Let us not sneer at this materialism, he cautions the more high-minded among his audience; let us see past our preconceived notions of the United States as a wasteland of crass commercialism and forgive the "noise," "bluster," and "swagger" of its Babbitts. For theirs is a nation still in its cultural "adolescence" (*gil habachrut*), and it is but natural that it would "invest the whole of its vigor and collective force in bodily growth." No doubt, one day America too will come of age and attain that level of culture in which "the spirit rises and begins to shine" (96). Till that day, "we must accept these people as they are ... a nation still in the making [*potentsia shel am*] ... confident in its powers and free of concern for the past" (99).

Innocent, youthful, materialistic and future-oriented—the America of Bialik's speech is a narrative construct with a long history in European letters. As Paul Giles notes, since the Renaissance, European writers and artists have repeatedly used the New World as a screen on which to project their romantic aspirations, sexual

yearnings, and, above all, political hopes.¹³ By the nineteenth century, as Rob Kroes has argued, Old World views of America had come together to form “the discursive formation of Europe’s ‘occidentalism’”: a stable assemblage of metaphors and stereotypes able to make ready sense of American difference.¹⁴ Bialik, who only moved to Palestine in 1924, was very much an Old World intellectual. Though raised in the provincial town of Zhitomir in the Ukrainian backwaters, he spent his intellectually formative years in the cosmopolitan centers of Odessa and Berlin, where he would have had ample opportunity to absorb this repertoire of tropes in the years prior to his American tour. His desultory reading about the United States in the general press and in Hebrew publications like *HaShiloah* (which he himself had edited 1904–1905) was one point of access to this vocabulary; his frequent correspondence with friends and associates sojourning in the United States was another. But the more immediate source for the rough-and-ready metaphors with which he peppered his 1926 speech was probably the many unrecorded conversations he held with his Jewish American hosts eager to explain America to their distinguished guest. Michael Brown, in his valuable account of Bialik’s tour, singles out writer and translator Maurice Samuel as one such mediator who “tried to give [Bialik] some sort of insight into the nature of American civilization.”¹⁵ But it is safe to assume that many other cultural explicators were on hand to present the poet with insights into the nature of their adoptive land, thus furnishing him with the linguistic resources he needed in order to fit his “fragmentary impressions” (*perurey hareshamim*) into an intelligible pattern.¹⁶ The fact that even his mildly condescending asides regarding America’s alleged callowness are couched in terms that enjoyed wide currency in both American and European letters at the time further supports the conclusion that what Bialik saw in America was determined in large part by the “America” mediated for him, in translation, before and during his visit.

There is, of course, nothing exceptional about such borrowing, nor does it take away from the sincerity of Bialik’s report. Language is always, in a sense, appropriated, and experience is always, in a sense, linguistic. We need not doubt, therefore, that Bialik was genuinely struck by much of what he saw during his tour; we need only insist that his impressions dilated into semantic regions hollowed out by the tropes of the American myth, with all of that discourse’s characteristic emphases and omissions. Indeed, how poorly equipped to understand 1920s America the poet actually was is on display whenever he hazards an observation that ranges beyond the “America” made legible by this myth: as, for instance, when he announces that America has “only two national heroes ... Washington and Lincoln” (99), or relays his astonishment at “the near absence of crime in New York” (101) (and this, as Brown wryly reminds us, at the height of Prohibition!).¹⁷

My point is not to condemn Bialik’s myopia or fault him for not seeing deeper or differently. Ailing, thronged by admirers, and harried by a relentless schedule,¹⁸ he could scarcely have been expected to develop a more nuanced view of 1920s American society. Nor am I suggesting that Bialik was the dupe of the discourse he borrows and

redeploys in his speech and interviews from the period. On the contrary, my claim is that Bialik, ever conscious of his position as “captain of Hebrew culture,” was using this rhetoric deliberately and selectively, tailoring it to the needs of an emerging Zionist national consciousness at a critical moment in the history of the *yishuv*.¹⁹ His impressions of America, I argue in this essay, should be read as a piece of self-criticism and self-definition masquerading as quasi-ethnographic observation.

To view Bialik’s “America” in this way—as both an appropriated linguistic artifact and as an oblique form of local intervention—is to follow Giles’s recommendation and regard it as a mobile nexus of tropes and images that “is valuable not for what it might be in itself, but for the interference it creates in others.”²⁰ What matters, from this comparative perspective, is not the degree to which non-Americans observers got America “right” (a hopeless standard anyway), but the diverse uses to which this putative object has been put across varying cultural and historical contexts. On this view, the “America” that the comparatist is trying to flesh out is neither some prelinguistic given nor an arbitrary fiction, but rather the hybrid construct that issues from the intercourse between a set of American mythemes—liberty, democracy, self-reliance, the frontier, the new—and the contingent uses to which this array is put in the non-American setting. America, in this equation, is no longer the exclusive Self: the center of narrative gravity that organizes the field of knowledge around its special intellectual, institutional, and political preoccupations. Instead, it is but one voice in what Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez have described as a series of “critical international dialogues.”²¹

Just as otherness presupposes sameness, dialogue presupposes difference. A comparative investigation of sites in which national discourses “miscegenate and overlap” does not entail essentializing or homogenizing national cultures. Nor does it require effacing or gainsaying the (relative) distinctiveness of national or cultural formations.²² On the contrary, it is precisely through explorations of sites of cultural–linguistic encounter and appropriation that cultural distinctiveness and group-based differences (however unstable and shifting) become salient. With this in mind, what makes Bialik’s engagement with America interesting, I argue, is not only those aspects of the American myth that he quotes in praise, but also those that he deems *inappropriate* to modern Jewish identity. Bialik, as we shall see, is careful to qualify his endorsement of the American way and is particularly wary of the New World tendency to prioritize the future over the past. This aspect of American culture he views as ultimately incompatible with the essence of Jewish ethos and thus with the aims of the Zionist project.

The poet’s ambivalence towards the temporal imagination of the American myth,²³ as I will show, is rooted in early Zionism’s own fraught negotiation of the role of time in the definition of its national identity. The fact that Bialik himself was one of the chief architects of this emergent national self-image is of course significant here. For just as Americans still inhabit the house of words to which Jefferson and Lincoln, Emerson and Hawthorne had contributed beams and supplied the scaffolding, so do

Israelis continue to inhabit the remarkably durable national metanarrative imagined into being by Bialik and his milieu. And if this is so, then we can use the Zionist poet's account of his tour, and specifically the way in which he weighs and measures, adopts and rejects, the familiar tropes of the American myth, as a keyhole through which to compare and contrast these two national narratives.

I shall begin by describing the historical circumstances that informed Bialik's speech, so as to set the stage for the discussion of how he puts the appropriated image of the United States to work in 1926 Palestine. America's difference, I shall argue, is used by Bialik in three principle ways: as a model for emulation; as a means to recall his audience to suppressed aspects of their own Jewish identity; and finally as a cultural counterpoint for the emergent Zionist self to define itself against. These diverging applications ambivalently converge in Bialik's evaluation of the way American culture weighs the relative claims of the future and the past.

American Difference as Model and Mirror

The immediate context in which Bialik saw fit to deploy the touchstones of the American myth is closely bound up with American history, and specifically with the early-twentieth century shift in US immigration policy. The passing of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which had all but barred America's gates before the "undesirable races" of southern and eastern Europe,²⁴ had resulted in an unprecedented spike in Jewish immigration to Palestine. Between the middle of 1924 and beginning of 1926, the Jewish population under the British Mandate had effectively doubled in size, overtaxing the *yishuv's* scant resources and further aggravating tensions between the Arab majority and the growing Jewish minority.²⁵ Most of these newcomers, much to the chagrin of Zionism's ideologues, were not ideological Zionists. They were middle-class merchants and professionals who had left Europe in search of a better life, not for an acting role in the drama of Jewish national revival. Given the chance, most would have preferred to join their relations in Brooklyn or the Lower East Side. As it was, they settled for the growing urban centers of Tel Aviv and Haifa and did their best to acclimate to the new conditions.²⁶

For many, however, life in 1920s Palestine proved too much. The unfamiliar environment, coupled with the lack of employment and the economic crisis of 1926, severely tested the staying power of this largely bourgeois wave of immigration. As Tom Segev sums up the period: "A sense of despair spread throughout the country. Many left. In 1926, the number of emigrants was close to half the total of immigrants" (261). Thus, nearly ten years after General Allenby's march into Jerusalem and the promise of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, the future of the *yishuv* seemed more uncertain than ever, with large swaths of the Jewish population disillusioned, disaffected, and economically vulnerable. It was against these depressed circumstances that the newly returned Bialik sang the praises of American pluck and forward-looking industriousness, expressly hoping, as one of his biographers put it,

“that something of [these attitudes] would emerge in the young and developing Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel.”²⁷

In its function as a mode of local intervention, Bialik’s account of America may be fruitfully compared to other, similarly motivated accounts of cultural otherness from the period. Prominent examples include Margaret Mead’s 1928 paean to Samoan pastoralism in *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Edith Wharton’s celebration of French traditionalism in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919). All three contemporary writers presented their native addressees, to quote James Clifford, with “a foreshortened picture [of a cultural other]” in order to drive home certain “moral, practical lessons.”²⁸ In Wharton’s case, her extravagant praise for the French “sense of the preciousness of long accumulations of experience” was intended to help counteract what she described as her compatriots’ propensity for “irreverence, impatience, to all sorts of rash and contemptuous short-cuts.”²⁹ Mead, for her part, held up a picture of a sexually uninhibited and “well-adjusted” Polynesian island society as a foil to what she regarded a neurotic and hyperregulated America of the 1920s.³⁰ Much in the same way, Bialik used his account of the exotic American other as a displaced site for engaging with issues at home. Specifically, the poet’s remarks about the American model should be read as a commentary on the self-ideal that lay at the core the Zionist metanarrative: the figure of *ha’yehudi ha’hadash*, the “New Jew.”

Pre-State Zionism was a revolutionary movement, which like its contemporary counterparts, from Bolshevism to Maoism, sought to transform not only society but the individual as well. If statehood was the endgame in terms of the movement’s political ambitions, the fashioning of a new, postexilic Jewish identity was the acme of its cultural ones. Here is David Ben-Gurion:

One could hardly find a revolution that goes deeper than what Zionism wants to do to the life of the Hebrew people. This is not merely a revolution of the political and economic structure—but a revolution of the very foundations of the personal lives of the members of the people... It is a revolt against the tradition of many centuries, helplessly longing for redemption... Instead of the corrupt existence of middlemen, hung-up in mid-air, we call for an independent existence of a working people, at home on the soil and in a creative economy.³¹

The human subject of the total revolution that Ben-Gurion describes received different and at times conflicting interpretations. For Ahad Ha’am, another of early Zionism’s preeminent intellectuals, the New Jew was to follow the model of the European gentleman: either the nineteenth-century English liberal or the *gebildete* burgher of the German-Austrian tradition. For Ahad Ha’am’s great adversary, the modernist iconoclast Micha Josef Berdyczewski, the New Jew was conceived as a cross between

the Nietzschean *Übermensch* and the primordial Hebrew of the pre-Talmudic biblical past. Finally, for the more left-leaning Zionist Laborites, the ideal to be emulated was the Stakhanovite: the unflagging Worker of Soviet ideology.³² What these somewhat incongruent models shared in common was the conviction that the New Jew—however defined—was to be the antithesis to the overly spiritualized and economically dependent figure of the exilic Jew. To the latter's otherworldly piety and passivity, the former would substitute an earthly, secular, and pragmatic frame of mind, the kind necessary to realize the only kind of redemption there is: independent national existence.

The issue of the body and of the material side of existence more broadly was a central preoccupation in early Zionist thought and literature. The movement's discourse, as Michael Gluzman notes, "presented the cultivation of the body as a countermeasure to the one-sided cultivation of the spirit in the diaspora."³³ The rehabilitation of the body also played a major role in Bialik's prose and poetry, which is peopled with figures characterized by an excess of physical presence and strength.³⁴ Having spent his early years in the yeshivas of Zhitomir and Volozhin under a rigorous regime of Talmudic instruction, he remained throughout his life deeply critical of the sterile scholasticism and self-alienating effects of this pedagogic tradition. And even while, in his role as leader and arbiter of an emerging Hebrew culture, Bialik played a decisive role in the preservation and transmission of the textual monuments of the Jewish past, he was also sharply critical of traditional Jewish pedagogy for its systematic denial of the needs of both body and soul. In his poetry, Bialik thus repeatedly juxtaposes the moribund and cerebral world of the yeshiva with the unselfconscious and sensual life beyond its walls. And these same themes also find their way into his 1926 speech. Americans, he says approvingly, "do not look too deeply into things; do not worry their head about them."³⁵ Instead, "each man hearkens to the voice of his desire [*yitzro*]," as though driven by an overriding need "to turn everything into a means for the eruption of life" (100). This exuberance and attunement to what is primal and elementary, continues Bialik, engenders a calm attitude of self-possession, which is on display even in society's youngest members:

Imagine yourselves walking through a New York City street, and there you see, in the midst of all that frenzied rush, a boy of nine or ten fearlessly making his way between thousands of automobiles. I can remember back when I was a child and still playing in the sand that when an ox-cart was sighted at a considerable distance from me, a great anxious commotion would break out: *it'll run the boy over!* Whereas there [in America], I've seen children walking peacefully and serenely past countless dangers. (97)

This composure, explains Bialik, is part and parcel of the American attitude that regards everything, “even education and literature,” as means towards “[one] central ideal: the enhancement of life” (100). Here is a land, in short, where assertive action trumps overscrupulous reflection; where the body and its desires receive their due; and where “the whole of man’s power is directed towards the construction of his base—of the material and physical” (96).

These remarks dovetail with the poet’s profuse praise for American economic productivity. In clear antithesis to (and potential corrective for) the mean economic dependency that characterized Jewish life in the diaspora, the America Bialik presents to his audience in Tel Aviv is a paradigm of efficiency and growth, where the “frantic rate of progress, which we cannot even fathom ... brings about remarkable results” (96). To get a proper view of the “typical American house” in all its enormity, he asserts in tall-tale hyperbole, one has to survey it from the distance of a mile, or otherwise view it from an airplane (97). For Americans, he adds, “anything that serves the growth of [material] power is both moral and good”; without fuss and scruple, they simply “draw a line between two points, and moving along it create in one day things [*kinyanim*] that would take us many years to build” (97). Indeed, one can only stand in awe “before this rush of forces, as they spread out in all directions” (97). We should not view this impulse towards material expansion and accumulation as a mark of artificiality, he cautions again, for it “flows from the very essence of American life, from its legitimate and natural disposition” (96–97). Prizing “action, technique, wealth accumulation and sports,” the American strives to “elevate all those things, which in the Old World were deemed unimportant or contemptible, to the status of first values” (101).

The exhortative aspect of all this becomes clear when Bialik affects to rediscover the selfsame no-nonsense materialism that he so admires in American culture in the Jewish past. As it now turns out, respect for the “material and physical” was, in fact, once part of *our* outlook, too:

Gentlemen, by some associative leap it has just come to me that our forebears, say sixty–seventy years ago, also saw things this way.... There was a saying among those Jews: may Man relate to God as he relates to his own needs. They understood that man’s relation to his natural wants is both natural and necessary, and hoped that he may be as loyal to his spiritual needs [*tsrachim elyonim*] as he is to his physical ones.... They knew that there is a constant connection between body and spirit. And that is the American way. (101)

Bialik’s “associative leap” suggests something of the motivations underlying the account of his American impressions. No longer simply a foreign model to be imitated, the American example is now revealed as a means to recall Bialik’s listeners to latent

aspects of their own Jewish heritage. By emulating “the American way”—or at least some aspects of it—he tells his audience, we shall in fact be recovering latent parts of our own culture: namely, the ability to strike a healthy balance between the claims of body and those of the soul, between this world and the next, thus preserving the best parts of our tradition, while we usher in a new chapter in the historical life of the Jewish people.

The Zionist Temporal Imagination and the Emersonian Futural Ethos

So far I have examined some of the ways in which Bialik uses a largely borrowed narrative construct, “America,” to hortatory purposes. When invoked in this fairly straightforward motivational fashion, America’s cultural difference is either no difference at all (because it mirrors back to “us” dormant aspects of our own legacy), or it functions as an objective correlative for abstract qualities that must emerge here, in Palestine, if the precarious project of nation building is to succeed. Yet there is another, and distinctly more ambiguous, level to Bialik’s discussion of America, to which I would like to turn now, and which involves the poet’s assessment of the futural ethos he discovers in America.

To bring this issue into focus, it is first necessary to underscore the similar role that the tropes of rupture and new beginnings had played in both Jewish and American nationalist discourses. Though its intellectual roots trace back to the discourse of European nationalism rather than to New England transcendentalism, Zionism was very much a forward-looking movement that defined itself against an immediate past while offering a powerful image of a better future. In this respect, its self-ascribed mission was a close fit with the Emersonian program as described by Irving Howe: “[the creation] of the new American, unalienated and self-subsistent, the first in history.”³⁶ Emerson’s challenge to his contemporaries, “why should we grope among the dry bones of the past? ... [There] are new lands, new men, new thoughts,”³⁷ would have sounded familiar and bracing to those who took up Berdyczewski’s call for a “complete change and radical new beginning,”³⁸ or A. D. Gordon’s Thoreauvian agrarian vision “of a new nation ... with a supreme, living and creative relation to nature and all that is in it.”³⁹ Nor did the future go unremarked in the political rhetoric of the day. We thus find, for instance, Berl Katznelson, the intellectual force behind the Zionist Labor movement, stressing the importance of cultivating what he called a “future-sense” (*hush-ha’atid*) in the emerging Hebrew proletariat, by which he meant active commitment to the establishment of an independent Zionist commonwealth. “You are the rock on which the future temple will be built,” he quoted Ferdinand Lassalle to his readers, urging them to see their present labors under the aspect of their future consummation.⁴⁰ And we can also hear an echo of this futural ethos in Bialik’s expressed admiration for the insouciance of American culture, which, free from the “pain of inheritance and its responsibilities,” can focus solely on the future.⁴¹

And yet, having just lauded the American prioritizing of the future over the past, Bialik immediately proceeds to qualify his endorsement of this ethos by stressing its foreignness and incompatibility with the Jewish cast of mind. Dismissing the past and focusing exclusively on the future may be very well for Americans, he now insists, but it is incongruent with the essence of Judaism and must not be adopted uncritically or wholesale. Between America's Jews and general American society, Bialik informs his audience, there stands a "wall of steel." Part of the reason for this separation, he says, is the anti-Jewish sentiment that prevails among the nation's elites, who, while content to turn to the Jews "come election time, [or to] throw them an occasional gift, such as Judge Brandeis," will never grant them full access to political life (130). But, says Bialik, the real reasons that America's Jews reside "on a completely different plane" lies in their divergent attitude towards their national history. Unlike their fellow citizens, they are constitutively unable to "free themselves of the concern for the past, of the responsibility for the past." To be Jewish, for Bialik, is to stand in a certain normative and emotional relation to the past—one that involves both loyalty and responsibility. And it is in this existential attitude that the "essential difference" of the Jews resides (102).

The same idea recurs in an interview that the poet gave during a layover in London on the way back to Palestine. "Jews, wherever they go," he says, "carry with them the burden of our ancient culture." To try and shake off this weight, he insists, is both futile and foolhardy, for "a people cannot discard its past—not even if it tries a thousand times—and only jeopardizes its natural, healthy existence in the attempt."⁴² Bialik's immediate concerns here are the threats of assimilation and identity loss, to which he thinks America's Jews are particularly vulnerable—which is why he stresses that whenever Jews try to adopt the ways of their American neighbors, they "leave an awkward impression ... like everything that is artificial and fake" (89). But the poet's remarks also give voice to a broad consensus in the mainstream of Zionist thought of the period, which insisted on the centrality of the Jewish past (properly interpreted) for the Jewish national project. Ahad Ha'am, very much Bialik's mentor in this respect, was speaking to this consensus when he issued his famous warning against those progressive ideologues who would "seek to redeem [the Jewish people] by offering them a future with no past,"⁴³ as did Katznelson when stating that "a creative generation does not jettison the legacy of former generations."⁴⁴

To get a better sense of how Zionism's temporal imaginary diverges from the American scheme of temporal values, a detour through the thought of Emerson, its primary formulator, is in order. For, while Bialik was probably unaware of the fact, it was to the Emersonian vocabulary that he was responding, and in particular to the latter's radical insistence that "the coming only is sacred."⁴⁵ Juxtaposing the Emersonian and Zionist temporal imaginaries will also help explain the failure of liberalism to take root and flourish in the cultural soil of Zionist Israel.

Emerson's radicalness consisted in his suggestion that inherited institutions, traditions and texts, while unavoidably shaping the consciousness of their inheritors,

possess no special privilege or authority; that they are merely tools at the service of the present for the creation of a different future. Should the past become an impediment to self or cultural reinvention, the thing to do, enjoined Emerson, was to turn our backs on it. Indeed, it was this “thrill of creative destruction, of overcoming the old arts, of superseding the revered fact” that proved to be Emerson’s most enduring legacy.⁴⁶ William James is at his most Emersonian when he writes, “Free-will pragmatically means *novelties in the world.*”⁴⁷ So is Nietzsche when he praises “the capacity to live *unhistorically.*”⁴⁸ James and Nietzsche were both thoroughly Hegelianized thinkers. Neither thought that human beings could simply shed their cultural inheritance and see the world as it independently is. Nor did John Dewey, who, while fully subscribing to the view of the self as a cultural product, urged that we “create ourselves as we create an unknown future.”⁴⁹ All three took Emerson’s description of himself as “a seeker with no Past at [his] back,” as neither a metaphysical claim about the nature of the self, nor as a denial of the formative role of the past, but as a normative challenge to traditionalism and as an invitation to self-creation.⁵⁰ What these writers took from Emerson, that is, was his willingness to prioritize the as-yet-unschematized future over the established verities of the past.

The essay in which Emerson articulates this view most fully is “Circles,” where he writes:

Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. Every general law only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us... In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures, of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted. Every man is not so much a workman in the world, as he is a suggestion of that he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age. (405)

What Emerson calls here a circle is very similar to what Thomas Kuhn calls a “paradigm” and Foucault a “discursive formation.”⁵¹ The suggestion common to these three notions is that truth is an achieved discursive regime, rather than some external, language-independent state of affairs. As Richard Rorty claims, for the protopragmatist Emerson of “Circles,” there is no final reality beyond culture to which human beings are answerable—“no enclosing wall called ‘the Real,’” which language strives to adequately represent—making each human achievement “simply a launching pad for a greater achievement.”⁵² On this view, neither the past nor reality holds any normative sway over the living present, which can only look to itself and its posterity for legitimation.

It was this Emerson, the poet of creative destruction, who laid the groundwork for both American pragmatism and the distinctive brand of romantic liberalism

associated with it. “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire,” he writes in “Circles,” “is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle.”⁵³ This is a summons to renounce the authority of the past, to regard identity as a creative achievement—a new circle to be drawn—rather than as an essence to be inherited or salvaged.

No attitude could be more alien to Zionism. For all its metaphors of rupture and secular invocations of the new (some of which have been surveyed above) Zionism’s true romance was—and remains—with the past. As James Diamond cogently puts it:

Secular Zionism, to be sure, wanted to re-define Jewish nationhood in totally secular terms, but it never allowed its bold and revolutionary vision to be cast in any terms other than “Jewish” ones. In doing this, it consigned itself to the language, symbols, and self-understanding of the Jewish sacral past. In other words, the Zionist enterprise never really had the courage of its revolutionary convictions. It did not escape the Jewish religious past, perhaps because, deep down, it really did not want to, or perhaps because, for any number of reasons, it could not.⁵⁴

The main reason that the Zionist enterprise, especially after 1948, could not help but turn to the “sacral past” was that, absent religion, Jewish communities around the world shared neither a vernacular language, nor common territory, nor still overlapping local histories.⁵⁵ To reimagine these loosely connected enclaves as components of a single national identity entailed, therefore, positing an underlying, precultural substratum—a national Geist—which it now became Zionism’s historical charter to “rediscover” or “regain,” and which, in turn, would serve to legitimate its territorial and national claims. The “sempiternal memory,” which Emerson urged his contemporaries to lose, was precisely the pivot on which this ideological maneuver turned.

The immediate past that the movement sought to overcome was the *galut*, or Exile, which Zionism (both before and after 1948) would portray as an historical caesura, a dark night of the nation’s soul, marked by Jewish helplessness, vulnerability, and stasis—an image that Bialik himself did much to solidify. Take his 1903 poem, “Be’ir ha’harega” (“In the City of Slaughter”), written in the wake of the Kishinev pogroms in Russia, where he couples lacerating imagery of wanton violence with savage denunciations of the passivity of the Jewish men, who are depicted as cowering in corners and behind barrels, praying to an empty sky, while their wives and daughters are raped and murdered before their eyes. As Yael Zerubavel notes, “this highly negative portrayal of Exile was regarded as a crucial countermodel for the construction of a Hebrew national identity and was therefore raised as a central theme in the

education of the New Hebrew youth,” intended to impress upon them that only a recovery of virile Hebraism of the nation’s biblical past can cure the nation from the degradations of Exile.⁵⁶ In other words, underlying Zionism’s rhetoric of break and new beginning (the “New Jew,” the “negation of the Diaspora”) was a countervailing tendency that sought to fuse the Zionist present with the protonational Hebraic past.

For many of the early Zionists, the return to the *Eretz Israel* and the recovery of the ancient Hebraic grandeur were two sides of the same ideological coin. And, as the following from Martin Buber illustrates, Zionist rhetoric often collapsed the two dimensions—the temporal and the spatial—into a single, overdetermined image of reclamation:

The significance of the *regaining* of the land of Israel by the people of Israel is to be understood on three levels, each of which, however, only reveals its full meaning in connection with the other two. On the first level it is acknowledged that people can only in the land *achieve its own existence again*; on the second, that it is only there that it will *rediscover* its own work, the free creative function of its spirit; on the third, that it needs the land in order to *regain* its holiness.⁵⁷ (emphasis added)

This Herderian bombast give hyperbolic expression to an abiding structure of Zionist thought, according to which the nation’s linear movement forward in historical time is, at the same time, a looping back to its ancient origins. Zionism, to draw on Eyal Chowers’s happy formulation, saw itself as presiding over a kind of “temporal marriage”: a bringing together of the present with the glorious past.⁵⁸ Yet it is important to emphasize that the future and the distant past formed an unequal conjugal arrangement in Zionist discourse. As discussed above, the pressing need for legitimation, on the one hand, and the desire to manufacture a shared basis of national identity, on the other, required Zionism (notwithstanding its secular pretensions) to draw heavily on the textual and mythic resources of the “sacred past” as a source of national identity. As Ben-Gurion, the Bible’s most influential secular inamorato, remarks:

The tales of the forefathers 4,000 years ago, the story of Abraham’s life and travels, the wandering of the Children of Israel in the desert after the exodus from Egypt, the wars by Joshua and the Judges who succeeded him ... all these are more relevant, more current, more fascinating and more vital for the new generation which was born and raised in Israel, than all the speeches and disputes of the Basel [Zionist] congresses put together.⁵⁹

This is the secularized version of Buber's spiritualized interpretation of Jewish history. The terminology is different, but the underlying message is the same. Like Buber, Ben-Gurion (who celebrated the "miraculous quality of the Jews to live the ancient past as though it were taking place today"),⁶⁰ regards Zionism's temporal and geographic break with the immediate past as the first step on the path back to the still more distant past.

The imbricated spatial-temporal imagery found in Buber and Ben-Gurion, with its unsteady fusion of revolutionary and atavistic impulses, likewise informs Bialik's response to America. It explains why he seems to waver on the question of what to do with the futural aspects of American ideology, why having praised its Emersonian enthusiasm for the new one moment, he rejects it as irreconcilable with Jewish nature the next. For Bialik—as for Ahad Ha'am, Buber, and Ben-Gurion—the movement toward the Zionist future was, at the same time, a drawing ever nearer to the nation's origins. In short, the Emersonian transvaluation of temporal values never had a Zionist equivalent, with far-reaching consequences for the possibility of a liberal Israel, to which issue I turn now.

Conclusion

The invocation of a mythic past as a source of meaning and legitimation is not unique to Israel, of course, but rarely does the past become the primary, almost exclusive, frame of interpretation. Seen from our present-day perspective, Gershom Scholem's cryptic warning about the threats involved in the attempt to secularize the language of the Bible seems, alas, to have been prescient. "God will not remain silent," he famously wrote, "in the language in which He has affirmed our life a thousand times and more."⁶¹ For Scholem, as Robert Alter explains, "strong and distinctive perceptions of value, time and space, God and creation and history incarnated in the old words lie in wait, ready to spring out again, to make history happen anew."⁶² Whatever its merit as a theory of language, Scholem's prognosis has been borne out by the cultural shifts taking place in Israel since the 1967 War—the event, writes Boas Evron, which revealed the "religious-messianic structures" underpinning the "alleged secularism" of many Israelis.⁶³ The occupation of the West Bank ("Judea and Samaria," in biblical parlance) opened up a new site in which to replay the Zionist drama of territorial conquest as spatial and temporal recovery, only this time in the unambiguously theological register of the religious settler movement. In recent decades, Jewish Israeli society has steadily moved away from its half-hearted flirtation with the liberal option and toward an evermore forthright embrace of the model which sociologist Sammy Samooaha has called "ethnic democracy": a system "in which the state is identified with a 'core ethnic nation,' not with its citizens."⁶⁴ This sociopolitical process dovetails with the increasing erosion of Israel's secularist self-image (associated with the state's founding generation) and the concomitant ascendance of

the Jewish religion and its ancient texts as the privileged sources of national and cultural identity.

That the future sense advocated by Katzenelson never became an enduring cultural–political attitude in Israel is due largely to Zionism’s remarkable success. The establishment of the state in 1948 was the improbable realization of what many initially viewed as a pipe dream, and the Zionist future was exhausted in this achievement. Zionism’s errand into wilderness, to draw on Perry Miller’s thesis about the American Puritans, was an epic without a sequel. As revolutionary vision hardened into prosaic fact, the futural vocabulary of Zionism rapidly fell into obsolescence, becoming fodder for a generation of satirists and elegists in the vein of Amos Oz, Hanoch Levin, and Yaakov Shabtai. Its central objective achieved, Zionism became a slogan and a badge claimed by politicians on the right, center, and left (provided, of course, that they are Jewish). Thus, from a program of emancipation, Zionism became a roundabout way to assert and justify the unequal distribution of rights and resources that underpin the prevailing ethnic hierarchy in Israel.

The absence of a substantive, detailed vision that might replace or supplement the defunct Zionist creed has resulted in large swaths of Israeli society turning in recent decades to the past for a sense of identity and purpose. This collective about-face, I have been suggesting in this essay, has much to do with the fact that, unlike America, Israel never evolved an Emersonian tradition such which might have defused the sacred ethnic past and spiritualized the future. This is not to deny, of course, that America has had its share of Bible-thumping atavists and other champions of regressive conservatism. But the presence of a well-entrenched liberal tradition (backed by a fairly strict separation of church and state) has so far served to check these cultural tendencies. What distinguishes the Israeli experiment in democracy from the American one, over and above the many similarities between the two, is precisely its lack of such tried-and-true liberal antibodies—a fact often passed over in silence by those eager to assert the natural affinity between the two nations. Indeed, the very definition of Israel as a Jewish state precludes it from becoming a liberal democracy in the sense taken for granted in America (on both sides of the political aisle) and in the democratic West more broadly. As Diamond writes, for all of Israel’s eager assimilation of American-style capitalism and culture over the last three decades, its core national narrative remains “ultimately inimical to the American narrative and forever precludes apprehending or comprehending Israel as a mini-America set in the Middle East.”⁶⁵

The lack of an Emersonian tradition in Hebrew is a matter of complete indifference to most kinds of Israelis, but it should be a cause for concern for Israeli liberals, for it has denied us a culturally resonant vocabulary with which to justify and promote our hopes and values. In the culture of memory that is Israel–Palestine, the liberal case meets its adversaries at a debilitating disadvantage. The thin, irreverent, exploratory liberal self-image cannot compete in a cultural discourse where identity is construed almost exclusively as a matter of antecedence, and where authenticity

trumps novelty as the primary identity-legitimizing value. And if validation for one's identity in contemporary Israel is sought by looking upwards or backwards rather than forwards, this has much to do with the fact that we have never had an Emerson to tell us that identity is a creative project to be achieved rather an essence to be inherited or recovered.

Notes

I am grateful to my colleagues, Hana Wirth-Nesher and Milette Shamir, for their judicious commentaries on earlier version of this essay.

¹ H. N. Bialik, "On the Visit to America," in *Dvarim Sheba'lpeh*, vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 75. All translations unless otherwise indicated are my own.

² H. N. Bialik, "On the Mission to America," in *Dvarim Sheba'lpeh*, vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 62.

³ Quoted in Michael Brown, *The Israeli-American Connection: Its Roots in the Yishuv, 1914–1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 81.

⁴ Gertrude Hirschler, "Bialik's Tour of the United States," *Midstream* 30, no. 7 (1984): 31.

⁵ Brown, *The Israeli-American Connection*, 82.

⁶ Anonymous, "Bialik, Hebrew Poet, Welcomed to America," *New York Times*, February 10, 1926, 2, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1926/02/10/issue.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset®ion=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article>

⁷ H. N. Bialik, "Let it Roar," in *The Complete Writings of Haim Nachman Bialik*, ed. Yaakov Fichman [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1932), 53.

⁸ Hirschler, "Bialik's Tour," 31.

⁹ H. N. Bialik, "On America," in *Dvarim Sheba'lpeh* vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 95.

¹⁰ Brown estimates that one of every ten Tel Avivians was in attendance to hear Bialik's account of America, attesting "not only to the prominence of the speaker but also to the importance of the topic"; Brown, *The Israeli-American Connection*, 90.

¹¹ Bialik, "On America," 97.

¹² Cf. R. W. B. Lewis's description of the American Adam: "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources." R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955), 5.

¹³ Some examples: The young Coleridge, enthralled by late eighteenth-century travel literature, nominated the Susquehanna River region in Pennsylvania as the future site of the first “Pantisocratic” society—the egalitarian community of freethinkers that he dreamt of together with Robert Southey. Goethe, an avid reader of James Fenimore Cooper, had nearly the entire cast of the 1829 version of *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels* leave for America, where, presumably, a just bourgeois society could still be established. And Thomas Paine (Giles’s example) imagined America as Europe’s idealized antithesis, the objective correlative of his fondest Enlightenment hopes. Paul Giles, “Virtual Americas: The Internationalization of American Studies and the Ideology of Exchange,” *American Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1998): 544–45.

¹⁴ Rob Kroes, “America and the European Sense of History,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1136.

¹⁵ Brown, *The Israeli-American Connection*, 88.

¹⁶ Bialik, “On America,” 93.

¹⁷ Brown, *The Israeli-American Connection*, 90.

¹⁸ In a letter to his mentor Ahad Ha’am, written while Bialik was sailing back to London, he complains of the “grueling and depressing work that had enslaved [him] for six straight months,” enumerating the endless “meetings, banquettes, parties, interviews, conversations, declarations and celebrations.” H. N. Bialik, “Letter to Ahad Ha’am” (3 September 1926), in *The Letters of Haim Nachman Bialik: 1925–1926* Vol. 3 [Hebrew], ed. Fishel Lachover (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 105.

¹⁹ Avner Holtzman, *H. N. Bialik* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2009), 17.

²⁰ Giles, “Virtual,” 544–45.

²¹ Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez, “Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism,” *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1996): 485.

²² Paul Giles, “Reconstructing American Studies: Transnational Paradoxes, Comparative Perspectives,” *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1994): 343.

²³ I use the phrase “temporal imagination” in Eyal Chowder’s sense: “the ways that people represent the nature of time,” and in particular the nature of the relationship “between proximate and distant events” (*The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012]), 3. Chowder’s book offers what is, to date, the most sustained and searching analysis of Zionist time.

²⁴ Mae M. Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 69.

²⁵ Shalom Reichman, “The Formation of the Map of the Yishuv During the Period of the Mandate,” in *History of the Jewish Settlement in Eretz Israel*, vol. 3 [Hebrew], ed. Moshe Lissak (Tel Aviv: The Bialik Institute, 1994), 217.

²⁶ Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate*, trans. Haim Watzman (London: Abacus, 2000), 186.

²⁷ Holtzman, *Bialik*, 208.

²⁸ James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 102–03.

²⁹ Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 31, 32.

³⁰ Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: William Morrow, 1928), 222.

³¹ Quoted in Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 200.

³² For an analysis of these different models, see pp. 155–70 of Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997).

³³ Michael Gluzman, *The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007), 23.

³⁴ The short story "Arye ba'al guf" ("Brawny Arye") and the long poem "Metei midbar" ("The Dead of the Desert") are two well-known examples.

³⁵ Bialik, "On America," 96.

³⁶ Irving Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 21.

³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 7.

³⁸ Quoted in Chowers, *The Political Philosophy*, 102.

³⁹ Aaron David Gordon, "Our Work from Now On" *Ma'abarot* vol. 2 [Hebrew], ed. Yaakoc Fichman (Jaffa: Ha'Poel Ha'tsair, 1919), 177.

⁴⁰ Berl Katznelson, "Towards the Coming Days," in *The Writings of Berl Katznelson*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at Poalei Eretz Israel, 1950), 61.

⁴¹ Bialik, "On America," 95.

⁴² H. N. Bialik, "On America and America's Jews," in *Dvarim Sheba'lpeh* vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 89.

⁴³ Ahad Ha'am (Ginzburg, Asher), "Past and Future," in *The Writings of Ahad Ha'am* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947), 82.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Anita Shapira, "Berl Katznelson's Concept of Culture," *Kesher* 35 [Hebrew], (2007): 87.

⁴⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 413.

⁴⁶ Phillip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 18.

⁴⁷ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (London: Dover, 1995), 46.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 9.

⁴⁹ John Dewey, "Individuality in Our Day," in *The Political Writings*, eds. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 88.

⁵⁰ Emerson, "Circles," 412.

⁵¹ For a comparison of Emerson's "circle" and Foucault's notion of "discursive formation," see Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22.

⁵² Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Romanticism," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109. David Bromwich echoes this reading when he suggests that "the great practical effect of Emerson's teaching was that it gave an idea of originality to a generation [that] included Whitman, Dickinson, Melville [and others]." David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 148.

⁵³ Emerson, "Circles," 414.

⁵⁴ James S. Diamond, "'And Never the Twain Shall Meet'? Reflections on the Americanization of Israeli Culture," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 1 (2000): 334.

⁵⁵ Yiddish served as a vernacular language for European Jewry, but was not spoken by other Jewish communities, in particular the Sephardic Jews, who began arriving en masse in the newly established Israel in the 1950s from North Africa and the Middle Eastern countries.

⁵⁶ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 20.

⁵⁷ Martin Buber, *On Zion*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: East and West Library, 1973), 147.

⁵⁸ Chowers, *The Political Philosophy*, 56.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ze'ev Tzahor, "Ben-Gurion's Mythopoetics," in *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory and Trauma*, eds. Robert Wistrich and David Ohana (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 67.

⁶⁰ Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews*, 237.

⁶¹ Gershom Scholem, “Pledge to our Language: Letter to Franz Rosenzweig,” trans. Martin Goldner, in *What Does a Jew Want? On Binationalism and Other Specters*, ed. Udi Aloni (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 248.

⁶² Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 36.

⁶³ Boas Evron, “In Praise of the Wise,” in *Athens and the Land of Oz* [Hebrew] (Binyamina: Nahar Books, 2010), 208.

⁶⁴ Sammy Samootha, “Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype,” *Israel Studies* 2, no. 2 (1997): 199. As Samootha emphasizes, whereas in most Western democracies “ethnic features are secondary, many of them being mere remnants of the past,” in the Israeli case ethnicity is construed as “imminent in its nature, identity, institutional organization, and public policy” (211). The presentness of the past, in other words, is not merely a cultural attitude in Israel; it is codified and enshrined in its social institutions and jurisprudence. For more on Israel as an ethnocracy (in English), see Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ Diamond, “And Never the Twain,” 331. For a brief history of the Americanization of Israel, see Maoz Azaryahu, “The Golden Arches of McDonald’s: On the ‘Americanization’ of Israel,” *Israel Studies* 5, no. 1 (2000): 41–64.

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