“The Necessities of the Hour”: Edith Wharton’s Reluctant Volunteerism
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Introduction
In *A Backward Glance* (1934), Edith Wharton recalled her “charitable work” during the World War I, for which France awarded her the decoration of “Chevalier” of the National Order of Legion of Honor, in 1916, and King Albert of Belgium awarded her the Medal of Queen Elizabeth, two years later¹: “Many women with whom I was in contact during the war had obviously found their vocation in nursing the wounded, or in other philanthropic activities… I cannot honestly say that I was of the number… Everything I did during the war in the way of charitable work was forced on me by the necessities of the hour” (356-7). Even though she distanced herself from the other “many women” who eagerly engaged in philanthropy, Wharton raised awareness and funds for the orphaned children of France’s destroyed towns and villages through her authorship. The immediate costs of the war were all too well-known to Wharton, from when she visited by motor-car and reported on the state of military hospitals near the front, for the Red Cross, in 1915. Her accounts of five trips into the war-zone appeared as four articles published by *Scribner’s Magazine*, serially, which were then later collectively published as *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort*. In these pieces, Wharton clarified that she aimed to “bring home to American readers some of the dreadful realities of war” (352).

By examining Edith Wharton’s war work during this period, the reader will see how this masculinized woman author appropriated a new kind of historical power through her reluctant volunteerism. Wharton worked indefatigably for war refugees, despite her personal desire to remain aloof; in this, she showed how she could overcome the off-putting connotations of public female activism—traditionally associated with movements like abolition or suffrage—in order to champion a just cause. This paper examines the sociopolitical implications of Edith Wharton’s war activism during the Great War, especially her editorship of her fund-raising *The Book of the Homeless*, for which Theodore Roosevelt wrote an introduction.

The fact that Edith Wharton maintained a deliberate public distance from feminist causes and political activism, during her lengthy and successful literary career, is not a new observation—given that numerous biographers and critics have reinforced, emphasized, and examined this fact from various vantage points. For example, as early as 1947, Percy Lubbock, in his *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (D. Appleton Century Co.), candidly stressed Wharton’s preference for the company of literary men, disclosing to the reading public his impression of Wharton’s attitude towards feminine alliances:

More than one of her friends have already noted, without surprise, that she preferred the company of men; and indeed there were some obvious reasons why she should, two of the more obvious being that she had a very feminine consciousness and a very masculine mind. She liked to be surrounded by the suit of an attentive court, and she liked to be talked to as a man; and both likings were

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¹ See page 2 of Sarah Bird Wright’s *Edith Wharton’s Travel Writing: The Making of a Connoisseur*.
gratified in a world of men and talk . . . She perhaps felt safer with men—safer from the claims and demands of a personal relation. (54)

Here, and at several points in his memoir, Lubbock chose to reinforce the idea that Wharton carefully separated herself from other women writers and female political figures who openly resisted and rejected traditional gender norms for women in a public forum. More recently, Deborah Lindsay Williams strongly asserted in her study, Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship, that particular modernist, and rather misogynistic, sensibilities in the literary world around the time of the Great War demonized women activists who challenged the status quo—activists which included the powerful voices of female figures like Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Susan Glaspell, among others. Biographers have recorded that Wharton openly disparaged the “rosy colored glasses” of female authors who published sentimental regionalist literature, such as Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. Yet, while Williams asserts that Wharton’s public persona of the masculine author obscured the truth about her private feminist sympathies, Lubbock was one of a long line of Wharton’s biographers who have suggested that her interiorized sense of self was masculine, which accounted for her sometimes harsh judgments of politically active or vocal women. There were, nevertheless, a limited number of women who managed the coup of gaining Wharton’s admiration, or becoming her friend, but this list was quite short and extremely exclusive, and included the likes of George Eliot, George Sand, and Vernon Lee, who also, coincidentally, assumed masculine non-de-plumes. Yet, Wharton’s own involvement with charity work during World War I in France led to her recognition, in the world at large, as a woman of action rather than simply a novelist of manners, a short story writer, or an authority on interior design.

When Edith Wharton took up four different causes during the Great War in France, she did so gradually and cautiously. She felt deeply moved to help those displaced by the war, particularly orphans, who remained a specter of her worst fear. Given that one of Wharton’s first published works, in 1879, was a poem, “Only a Child,” based on a contemporary article in The World, which gave “an account of the suicide in the House of Refuge at Philadelphia of a boy who was only twelve years old. He was locked up in solitary confinement. They found him hanging by the neck dead and cold. Tired of waiting for the release that never came, he had at last escaped -- from that House of Refuge!” (Auchincloss). In this contextual note that Wharton provided, she clearly linked being homeless and parentless in youth with a state of desperation, a desperation that could and did lead to self-harm and suicide—here, seen as an escape from a kind of living hell. The poem itself detailed a picture of the imagined homeless child’s terrible state: “His little hands had nought to do / But beat against the wall, / Until at last too tired they grew / - -Poor little hands -- so small! / And so he lay there voiceless, / Alone upon the ground; / If he wept, his tears were noiseless, / For he feared to hear their sound.” Several of Wharton’s greatest fears permeate this poem—being homeless, not belonging to a family, abandonment, losing one’s voice or agency, losing the will to live—all of which resonated with the scenes she witnessed during the outbreak of war in France during 1914, scenes of horror she could not ignore or imagine away, especially as she met the eyes of the afflicted and oppressed.
In her articles about the war at the French front, collected in *Fighting France*, Wharton emphasizes the shocking and “awful” stare of those homeless, displaced victims of the conflict. She writes, “[F]or one cannot pass through Chalons without meeting, on their way from the station, a long line of ‘eclopes’—the unwounded but battered, shattered, frost-bitten, deafened and half-paralyzed wreckage of the awful struggle. These poor wretches, in their thousands, are daily shipped back from the front to rest and be restored; and it is a grim sight to watch them limping by, and to meet the dazed stare of eyes that have seen what one dare not picture” (17). In this passage, she calls attention to the “dazed stare of eyes” traumatized by vision, by observing visually horrible scenes that have left them “battered, shattered … deafened, and half-paralyzed.” The survivors transform into corporeal “wreckage,” the horror of warfare made manifest in the scarred psyches of voiceless, staring figures that limp onward, by the thousands, aimlessly, without a home. Such a vision moved Wharton to action, as she could not, in good conscience, sit by and simply watch the war in a state of voyeuristic helplessness. Instead, she overcame her disinclination towards philanthropic work, for a greater human cause.

According to R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton’s war work began in 1914, when the refugees starting making their way to Paris, causing the city’s inhabitants to face the reality of the war at hand. When she started her charity efforts, Wharton started her contributions with founding the American Hostels for Refugees, in November, with $500 and limited supplies. Lewis stresses that Wharton’s effective management skills led to the successful expansion of housing and services offered to the war’s homeless in France:

She now began what would grow into an enormous effort to provide care for the civilian refugees who were pouring into the city, from the ravaged battle areas. The American Hostels for Refugees, opened in November 1914 with $500 and a few bits of furniture, were soon operating in half a dozen houses and apartments in Paris, with a big lunchroom, a grocery-distribution point, a clothing depot, a free clinic, a coal-delivery service, a day nursery, classrooms, and an employment agency: these in addition to the lodgings that took in 9,300 refugees in the first year. The hostels were supported by donations, some of them large, collected by a network of interlocking committees in Paris, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. (329-30)

Quite remarkably, in this passage, we can see that Wharton, despite her protestations or disinclination, was quite skilled in the way of philanthropic work. She used her strong sense of detecting character to locate individuals who would be useful in the effort and delegated day-to-day running of things to others, but was also willing to roll up her sleeves and pitch in, working long hours to ensure that objectives were being met. From placing orders for supplies to reaching out to wealthy connections for donations, the writer, who fought introversion and shyness, crossed the threshold into public charity work, forcing her to overcome what could only be characterized as a form of social anxiety; she would then take up several additional causes which quadrupled her responsibility. Wharton began to see the value in her work, differentiating her contribution from the less helpful efforts of other privileged women who took up philanthropic activities to further their image as socialites. In one letter to her good friend Bernard Berenson, from August 22, 1914, an exasperated Wharton complained:
The silly idiot women who have turned their drawing-room into hospitals (at great expense), & are now making shirts for the wounded, are robbing the poor stranded ouvrières of their only means of living, & the Red Cross is beginning to be severely criticized by the Syndicat du Travail for its immense work-rooms where femmes du monde do the work the others ought to have—so my “ouvroir” has excited a good deal of interest, & I hope we may get help to carry it on. (334)

Here, one can observe that Wharton’s biting criticism of “silly idiot women” who converted their homes into hospitals as an expression of frustration of unnecessary waste. Wharton reveals her judgment of those who appear more motivated by showcasing their homes as a site of sacrifice and a staged performance of self-interested philanthropy as inefficient, uneconomical, and, even worse, self-indulgent. Such women volunteers, in her opinion, were giving the Red Cross a poor reputation in that they were depriving those who needed an occupation to make money and support their families, denying them of a chance for dignity and self-respect. Thus, when the year ended, Wharton delved even deeper into charity work which helped her to feel useful and offered a distraction from the helplessness of war; yet, she did this in part to combat those other charity workers who actually were bungling the job of true philanthropy.

Thus, the year 1915 kept Edith Wharton extremely busy, as she assumed additional roles for charities beyond the American Hostels for Refugees; she began by agreeing to undertake a number of motor-tours of the French front, with her good friend Walter Berry, to visit military hospitals for the “Croix Rouge” or Red Cross. She investigated the conditions of the hospitals and their wounded, recorded the state of affairs, inventoried supplies, relayed supply requests, and delivered much-needed medical goods to doctors and nurses. Wharton felt powerfully affected by what she witnessed during such supply runs to the hospitals, as she records in *Fighting France*: “We saw in turn all the various divisions of the unfolding frieze: first the infantry and artillery, the sappers and miners, the endless trains of guns and ammunition, then the long line of grey supply-wagons, and finally the stretcher-bearers following the Red Cross ambulances. All the story of a day’s warfare was written in the spectacle of that endless silent flow to the front” (31). Again, the image of silent suffering seems to haunt Wharton, here, as she details the “spectacle” of the “endless silent flow to the front,” reinforcing the dehumanizing aspects of warfare which reduced all those affected to a state of catatonia and conformity. Her travel for the Red Cross led Wharton to Belgium, where she saw numbers of Flemish children holed up in cellars of damaged structures in destroyed and decaying villages. The Belgian government requested that Wharton assume the additional challenge of finding these displaced children homes, and this began the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee: “Before 1915 was out, six homes were being run for this committee in Paris and the outskirts and as far away as the Normandy coast. Seven hundred fifty children and 150 elderly persons and nuns had been taken in—’my prettiest and showiest and altogether most appealing charity,’ Edith called it in a brochure” (Lewis 330). Yet, there would be yet another charity, one devoted to “a cure program for the *tuberculeux de guerre*: French soldiers who had contracted tuberculosis in the evil conditions of the forward trenches” (330-1), to which Wharton would contribute during the Great War, bringing the total charities she had undertaken to four.
Given the tremendous effort Wharton invested in her causes, she often felt frustration with women philanthropists and war volunteers whose mismanagement and misappropriation of money cost others time and energy—negatively affecting those who were already so oppressed by the war’s costs. For example, in a letter to her friend Sara Norton, written on September 27, 1914, Wharton writes: “I am back in Paris much sooner than I had expected, as the philanthropic lady in whose settlement I had established my work-room, fled before the German approach & put her 50 compatriots into the streets! The situation was complicated by the fact that her manageress (& confidential friend) carried off all the funds (nearly $2000!), & that we got them back only through the intervention of the Red Cross, under whom I am working—” (338). Here, Wharton refers to the “philanthropic lady” who, at the first sign of invasion, deserts her wards and turns them out of her home, revealing that her sense of self-preservation trumped any charitable act she had been performing for the war effort. To exacerbate the situation, that “philanthropic” lady’s close friend and fellow volunteer took with her all of the donations that had been given for the support of refugees—like the fifty individuals who she had just turned out onto the streets. The irony of the debacle was not lost on Wharton, whose use of an exclamation point and the term, “philanthropic lady,” betrays her wry, sarcastic tone in her missive. Yet, already, in September of 1914, Wharton’s charity work during the war was beginning to take its toll, draining the energy from her fifty-two-year-old body.

In her personal letters to friends, Wharton repeatedly mentions the physical and emotional toll that four war charities were exacting from her, emphasizing that she remained a reluctant volunteer and viewed philanthropy as a pastime that still did not suit her. In her letter to Bernard Berenson, from September 30, 1914, Wharton confides that her charity work forced her to keep long hours, quite separate from her career as a writer, and true exhaustion had begun to set in: “I’m so glad to get your letter--but you must forgive if I send in return a scrawl traced by a hand shaking with fatigue, & guided by a brain wobbling with imbecility--I’m not used to philanthropy, & since I got back and took over my work-room from Walter’s heroic shoulders I’ve been at it ever day from 8 a.m. till dinner. As soon as peace is declared I shall renounce good works forever!” (341) Scrawling out letters with a shaking hand, the author knew that she experienced great fatigue that caused her body and mind to become affected, and longed for a return to normalcy, back to her writing routine and a break from the “good works” which compelled her to focus on the needs of those less fortunate. By December of that same year, Wharton wrote to Mary Berenson, reinforcing the idea that she really did not want to participate in charitable works, but felt compelled to do it, and that her aversion to philanthropy could be detected in her demeanor. In her letter, she explained: “...I’m too busy all day & too tired at night. One of the things which proves me to be not made for philanthropy (indeed Percy L. says he can forgive me only because I so visibly hate what I am doing)--one of the proofs of my inadequacy is that in the evening, instead of being able to sit down for a pen-prattle with my friends, I am mentally embrouillée, & can only drowse over La France Contemporaine or such-like” (343-4). Referring to their mutual friend, Percy Lubbock, Wharton teasingly reiterates that

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2 Read: “muddled” or “confused.”
she was “not made for philanthropy,” citing Lubbock as one who could testify to her “hate” for the work that had long been occupying her days. Yet, interestingly enough, Lubbock, in his memoir of Wharton, pays her a compliment while confirming her reluctance towards volunteerism. He writes: “Not what she did but how she did it is my concern, and not the direction that her efforts took, but the promptness, the resourcefulness, the decision and conviction with which she launched them. She was and knew herself to be without experience in organizing the work of others; she could stimulate, she could fire by her example, she could see nothing went flat or stale in the doing; and then she could refrain, having as little love as she had the aptitude for the routine of working days, nor the least desire to take it out of hands more skilled for it” (127-8). Lubbock, in this passage, echoes Wharton’s description of her “charitable work” during the war in A Backward Glance, when she wrote, “Everything I did during the war in the way of charitable work was forced on me by the necessities of the hour, but always with the sense that others would have done it far better; and my first respite came when I felt free to return to my own work” (263). Yet, she was quite successful at it, meritng international recognition and honors, and earning the admiration of her friend, Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote the introduction to her printed anthology of works, Book of the Homeless, a fund-raising publication for her two charities, the American Hostels for Refugees and Children of Flanders Relief Committee.

In his introduction to The Book of the Homeless, published by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1916, Theodore Roosevelt calls attention to Edith Wharton’s sense of the “highest duty” in her charity work for children of the Great War, stressing her contribution by scolding other Americans into action, to regain nationalistic pride. He asserts: “There is no higher duty than to care for the refugees and above all the child refugees who have fled from Belgium… The part that America has played in this great tragedy is not an exalted part; and there is all the more reason why Americans should hold up the hands of those of their number who, like Mrs. Wharton, are endeavoring to some extent to remedy national shortcomings” (x). Roosevelt, then, points out to the reader, with powerful conviction, “We owe Mrs. Wharton all the assistance we can give” (x). As the former President of the United States whose term had ended only seven years before, Roosevelt’s commendation of Wharton’s charity work only added to the formal recognition she received, internationally. She was awarded the title of “Chevalier” for the Legion of Honor, by the French government, in 1916—one of the country’s highest honors to bestow on a civilian—and Belgium gave her honor of the Medaille Reine Elisabeth in 1918 (Schriber 141). Alan Price, in his study, End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War, discusses Wharton’s “red ribbon,” as she playfully called her French honor, and how she enjoyed the distinction and special treatment such recognition afforded her. Providing a defense for her writing perceived as propaganda during the Great War, Price provides a historical context for Wharton’s charged, political rhetoric, claiming: “We need to remember that the phenomenon of American authors turning from fiction to propaganda to sway a neutral American reading public and to aid war charities was not uncommon between 1914 and 1917. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Gertrude Atherton, Alice B. Toklas, and Gertrude Stein participated in and wrote about relief activities in Belgium and France” (xii-xiii). Fascinatingly, each author
Price cites, here, was a woman activist with feminist leanings—a subject position Wharton publically dissociated herself from in her accounts of her war work, over and over again, by asserting that she did not enjoy nor was skilled at philanthropic endeavors, unlike the “women who had obviously found their vocation in nursing the wounded, or in other philanthropic activities” (ABG 263). She described some of these women as finding a cause that “turned them forever from a life of discontented idling” or unleashed a “real genius for organization,” while others discovered “a passion for self-sacrifice that made all selfish pleasures appear insipid” (263). Thus, according to Wharton, such politically-minded women philanthropists were either distracting themselves from a boring life, finding an outlet for what today might be called a form of obsessive compulsive disorder, or were transformed into self-fashioned martyrs who derived more pleasure from being selfless than anything else in life. Here, Wharton exhibited a particular anxiety in regard to what her political activism in providing and managing hostels and workrooms for war refugees, given that she was a woman.

In her study, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict 1880-1917*, Meredith Tax argues that the progressive feminists of turn-of-the-century America were a heterogeneous group comprised of “trade union activists, industrial unionists, intellectuals; they were socialists, anarchists, and radical feminists of every shade from red to pink” (vii). Providing cultural and historical contexts for period during which Wharton conducted her charity work, it becomes clear that feminist political action in a public arena could suggest certain leanings in one’s subject position. Tax explains:

Socialist housewives, settlement works, and the left wing of the feminist movement were the main allies of working women in the period between the 1880s and World War I. Their support could not make up for the general lack of help from the labor movement; however, there were so many obstacles in the movement for working women that it took the combined forces of the united front of women and organized labor to make it possible…The united front of women—the alliance of socialists, feminists, and trade unionists—was therefore a major factor in giving working women the social muscle necessary to organize into trade unions in this period. (20)

Here, Tax suggests that feminist action for political causes in America conveyed distinct messages related to socialism and the organized labor movement. Given that Wharton did not identify as a socialist in terms of her political stance, and specifically goes out of her way to reinforce this to her American reading public, it seems that the author would have had reason to expose self-consciousness in terms of her extremely public and highly recognized charity work. She emphasizes in both her published and private writing that her volunteerism did not mean that she was a socialist or trade unionist—and, furthermore, definitely not, as Tax describes, an “anarchist” or “radical feminist.”

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton carefully posits herself as opposed to the idea of enjoying what she terms “social service,” revealing a conscious distancing from the socialist movement. In writing about what she felt was an initial problem in determining who would make a suitable and helpful volunteer, when recruiting workers for her war charities, she admits, “I was beginning to fear that my lack of discernment in choosing my helpers, and my innate
distaste for anything like ‘social service,’ were a hopeless handicap to my usefulness” (256). This confession falls in line with Williams’ suggestion that Wharton, like Willa Cather, openly and purposefully removed herself from any connection with feminist causes—or “the sisterhood” as the critic terms it. Williams contends:

Ultimately, however, Wharton’s and Cather’s rejection of public literary sisterhood was instrumental in their achieving canonical status, while Gale, who celebrated community, collaboration, and sisterhood, has been forgotten. Wharton and Cather appropriated the model of the Romantic artist—isolated, independent, solitary—developed in Europe and England a century earlier by Keats, Shelley, Goethe, and others. (4)

In her study, Williams details how Wharton and Cather, by their self-fashioning of masculine identities as writers, were given preference by male literary scholars when many other formerly popular women writers were falling into obscurity. By aligning themselves with masculine identity politics (and this could be achieved by simply creating a binary opposition to feminist ones), especially during the 1930s (which is when Wharton’s A Backward Glance was published), Wharton and Cather found inclusion and acceptance, even though they privately challenged many patriarchal social norms. Wharton remained a savvy enough businesswoman to understand that she needed to maintain a particular readership and marketability, and her political associations would certainly influence her book sales. Williams elaborates:

Wharton’s and Cather’s public refusal of sisterhood—and any other form of affiliative politics—is central to their creation of public authorial personae, images that emerged in response to the increasing demand for celebrity as a way to sell books. Literary history has followed their ‘spin’: the two authors are almost never studied in conjunction with other women writers and are rarely contextualized within the literary marketplace where each experienced critical and financial success. (6)

Here, Wharton “spins” her public image, performing an identity that will bolster her success as a literary celebrity, whose livelihood depends on her marketability. Yet, while Williams suggests that Wharton’s self-conception as the exiled, solitary, and masculinized artist was one that was rather inauthentic and adapted from Romantic writers, Dale Bauer, in her study, claims that Wharton truly envisioned herself, particularly in the 1930s, when she wrote about her charity work during the Great War, as a kind of “Edith Agonistes,” isolated, “fighting alone and figuratively in the dark” (165). Citing a letter from May 25, 1937, where Wharton signed herself “Edith Agonistes” (a play on words from Milton’s Samson Agonistes), Bauer suggests that Wharton believed her political views placed her at odds with a society she criticized, claiming that she feared during the twenties and thirties in America an “authoritarian culture” that could lead to an “overregulated, even Taylorized society” (xvi). Here, the idea of conformity of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “One Best Way” and scientific management in work efficiency, made popular during the Progressive Era, acted as a harbinger of dehumanizing individuals for a better social good—the kind of thought which lead to the popularity of the eugenics movement in specific socialist groups. Perhaps, Wharton’s refusal to embrace overt political movements connected to “social service” betrayed her true fear of the dangers such social conformity could
engender.

Ultimately, Edith Wharton publically stressed her role in undertaking charities during the Great War as a result of the “necessities of the hour,” the moral compulsion that she must act, must support those who were suffering as a result of the warfare, even against her wish or will. She made it very clear to both her close friends and her reading public that she remained vastly different from those women traditionally associated with philanthropy. One the one hand, she criticized the “lady philanthropist” and the “silly idiot women” who were poseurs in turning their stately homes into hospitals, who merely engaged in public work to keep up an appearance related to their privileged social status. Such women, to Wharton, were useless and even detrimental to the causes to which they subscribed, by depriving the impoverished of the jobs they desperately needed, for example. On the other hand, Wharton dissociated herself from the “radical feminists” or “the sisterhood” which would have cost her readers and sales in the literary marketplace—in order to secure her own place in a literary canon controlled by men. By disavowing any kind of openly feminist personal politics, she sought to reinforce the idea that she possessed a masculine mind and, therefore, deserved the privilege of belonging to an exclusive set of men-of-letters. Finally, Wharton eventually grew exhausted by the tremendous effort she expended during World War I, confessing that she was only too happy to retreat into the French countryside when the conflict concluded; she would then contentedly spend her time engaged in her two favorite pastimes: writing and gardening.

Thus, when we look at Edith Wharton as a political figure, internationally recognized and decorated by multiple countries for her charity work during the Great War, it is tempting to categorize her as a “woman in power” along with assertive, determined political women who sought out conflict or chose to fight the good fight, without pause or concern for their own well-being. Yet, I believe that Edith Wharton represents another kind of woman of power—one who came to her work reluctantly, against her own sense of desire or self-preservation, who, quite self-consciously, found herself organizing and taking up “good works,” due to deep personal conviction, a powerful moral obligation that overrode any kind of self-interested impulse. Like Bartleby the Scrivener, Wharton would have preferred not to have engaged in her charity work, but multitudes of people, and even several nations, were very grateful that she did.

Works Cited


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