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Anselm Kiefer and the Art of Allusion: Dialectics of the Early *Margarete* and *Sulamith* Paintings

Wenn er hier zu seinem Schrecken sieht, wie die Logik sich an diesen Grenzen um sich selbst ringelt und endlich sich in den Schwanz beisst—da bricht die neue Form der Erkenntniss durch, *die tragische Erkenntniss*, die, um nur ertragen zu werden, als Schutz und Heilmittel die Kunst braucht.

When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail—suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, *tragic insight*, which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy.

—Fredrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [*The Birth of Tragedy*]

IN A WORLD WHERE ATROCITIES HAPPEN on a scale that would have been unimaginable prior to the twentieth century, we must contend with the inadequacy of language, whether visual or textual, to account for the horror of these experiences. What is the use of art, poetry, or, we might add, criticism, in light of these events? Theodor Adorno grappled with these questions when he commented that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. In contrast, Anselm Kiefer suggests the possibility that through art we can begin to be redeemed from these horrors. But because Kiefer's philosophy relies on art's representation of even the most reprehensible perspectives of history, he places some heady responsibilities on his critics—both to decide if "good" politics is essential to "good" art and to assess whether Kiefer's art reflects "good" politics, even if it is "good" art.

Though his art is now rarely viewed as controversial (see Hutchinson 2), Kiefer's notorious *Besetzungen* or "Occupations" photographs, in which he performs the taboo *Sieg Heil* gesture at major World War II battle sites and domestic spaces, provide a useful example of what is at issue in his work (see, especially, Arasse 38-40). These smaller works were exhibited at the 1980 Venice Biennale, together with larger paintings and sculptures by George Bazelitz that, as Liza Saltzman describes them, "delved into myths of the Nibelungen, Wagnerian scenarios, German intellectual history, and nationalistic militarism, all rendered on a scale and with a palette that was seen to bespeak a nascent, or renascent and potent, German national identity replete with all its ghosts" (108). German critics were scandalized and deeply concerned about how international viewers might per-

ceive these works. As John Hutchinson suggests, "[t]here would have been little in the way of controversy had Kiefer's art explicitly condemned Germany's fascist past. But although—and because—his iconography is refracted by irony and fragmentation, his images have always seemed equivocal, and even, at times, elegiac" (3).

Kiefer's work is now understood as contributing to a discourse on post-World War II German nationalism and iconoclasm, and it is partly this subject matter itself, in the wake of what scholars have termed Germany's "cultural amnesia" about the Holocaust, that lends Kiefer's work such edge.[1] But Kiefer's work is made precarious not only because he takes up the same Romantic painters that the Nazis used for their propaganda, but also because the epic, heroic, and Romantic qualities he exploits in his works are key elements of narratives that have historically perpetuated the oppression of marginalized peoples: they enable the illusion that there are clear delineations between good and evil, self and other, violent masculinity and subservient femininity, German and Jew.

Some of the *Besetzungen* photographs make the connection between Romanticism and Nazi totalitarianism explicit through citation. One, for example, alludes to Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*; see figures 1 and 2), the Romantic image par excellence (see M. Rosenthal 14-15). Even in non-narrative works like *Der Wanderer*, the work's artistry lies in its creation of a Romantic "sublime," so that the landscape seems to emanate from the central figure in a manner that blends "heavenly" and "earthly" perspectives. Leo Koerner observes:

> [W]e are left uncertain whether we stand on solid ground behind the summit, or whether we float in space with the clouds. [. . .] Standing with its feet on the ground, however, is the *Rückenfigur* [traveler], installed in the midst of things, between the vast, insubstantial landscape and our own ambiguous point of view. It is he who mediates our experience of the scene, and who knits together the landscape's disparate fragments. Indeed it is hard to imagine what the view from the summit would be without his centralizing and concealing presence, how, for example, the symmetrical hills radiating from just below his shoulders would actually meet in the valley. (Koerner 181-82)

Kiefer's photographs similarly reproduce the controlling gaze of Nazi surveillance through which a chaotic world is unnaturally ordered. Yet *Besetzungen* also undermines such comparisons.[2] Whereas traditional *Sieg Heil* images portray crowds of people saluting in unison, Kiefer deconstructs the iconography of the image by saluting the empty ocean or by saluting in his own bathtub, and so emphasizes the futility of such a gesture. Moreover, in contemporaneous works like *Für Genet* (*To Genet*; figure 3) that also foreground the *Sieg Heil*, Kiefer ridicules the cult of masculinity associated with the gesture by performing the *Sieg Heil* in a woman's dress. Once again, however, these figures are equivocal: while Kiefer's photographs deconstruct the performance of the Nazi salute by staging it in "drag" and in domestic spaces, they also reify the Romantic idea of the male artist-as-shaman and Christ-figure, a claim for the healing and supernatural powers of

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[1] In this, Kiefer follows in the tradition of one of his mentors, Joseph Bueys. See Arasse 28.

[2] Critical responses to the provocative ambivalence of Anselm Kiefer's work continue to be ambivalent themselves. For Saltzman, Huyssen, and López-Pedraza, Kiefer's art remains an object of concern, despite their intellectual admiration of it. For Gilmour, Biro, and Arasse, the ambivalence of Kiefer's art is the primary reason for its brilliance, and in some sense, its democratic tendencies.

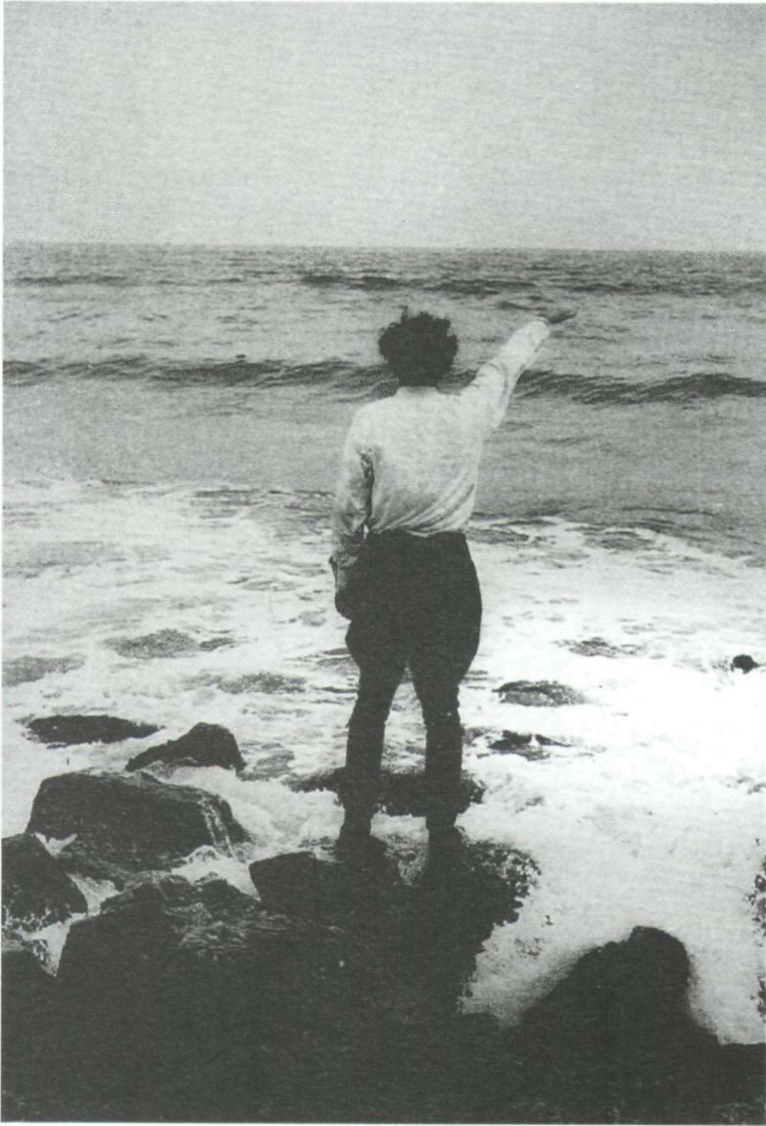

Figure 1: Anselm Kiefer, page 144 from *Besetzungen* [*Occupations*], 1969. From *Interfunktionen*, Cologne, no. 12, 1975. Book.

artistry through its masculine appropriation of feminine (pro)creative abilities.[3] By reviving this proscribed salute, and in repeatedly performing it himself, Kiefer also reintegrates an image of domination into critical currency and contemporary memory. This step is surely risky, even if successful. Defending the sort of artistic license used in his *Besetzungen* photographs, Kiefer explains, "I do not

[3] Saltzman reads Kiefer here as a "cross-dresser" (61); I see Kiefer as something more akin to a shaman. See especially Eliade's *Shamanism*, Chapter 13, for further information. This use of shamanic symbols once again links Kiefer with his former teacher Joseph Bueys.

Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [*Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*], ca. 1817. Oil on canvas, 94.8 x 74.8 cm. Kunsthalle, Hamburg. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to reenact what they did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist" (qtd. in Saltzman 60). Given these attempts, we can appreciate the concerns of the German critics at the Venice Biennale who condemned Kiefer's work.

Kiefer's most recognized and least controversial works to date borrow their titles from Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's provocative poem "Todesfuge." The paintings in the series, named *Dein goldenes Haar, Margarete* (*Your Golden Hair, Margarete*; figure 7)[4] or *Dein aschenes Haar, Sulamit* (*Your Ashen Hair, Sulamith*;

[4] Sometimes also *Dein blondes Haar, Margarete* (*Your Blond Hair, Margarete*).

Figure 3: Anselm Kiefer, from *Für Genet* [*To Genet*], 1969.
Book, 70 x 50 x 8 cm., George Baselitz, Derneburg.

figure 8), draw on a text that has inspired considerable philosophical debate about the nature and potential of art in post-Holocaust Germany.[5] Celan's poem has also given rise to ethical and biographical debates about Jewish forgiveness or, conversely, a Jewish inability to reconcile with the horrors of the Holocaust and the German present (see Colin 42 and Glenn 70). Celan incorporates allusive names—Margarete, a name taken from the female protagonist in Goethe's *Faust,* and Sulamith, the name of the Jewish princess from the Biblical Song of Songs—into his poem, and yet the complexity of these motifs has remained unaccounted for in critical analyses of Kiefer's *Margarete* and *Sulamith* paintings. In this essay, I explore the function of the Margarete and Sulamith allusions in Kiefer's work by first moving toward an understanding of them in Celan's poem. To do so, I consider their origins and meanings in Celan's Biblical and Romantic sources. Recognizing Celan's allusions in "Todesfuge" as a response to two famous *Lukasbund* paintings clarifies our understanding of his narrator's anger and bitterness. I further propose that both Celan and Kiefer are informed by a particular Romantic effort to express the "sublime," the irresolvable space between earthly and heavenly ideals. These Romantic sources also accentuate the way in which Celan's "Todesfuge" and Kiefer's *Margarete* and *Sulamith* paintings are in dialogue with each other. If Celan's Margarete and Sulamith should be understood as a discordant and bitter pairing, Kiefer's *Margarete* and *Sulamith* reveal the bleak unity of these two figures, a unity which promises hope even as it confesses to their utter devastation.

Celan's "Todesfuge" was conceptualized in 1945 while Celan was in a concentration camp.[6] Although this poem is little known in the United States outside of

[5] See Saltzman's remarkable first chapter, "'Thou Shalt Not Make Graven Images'": Adorno, Kiefer, and the Ethics of Representation" (17-47), for further discussion of Kiefer's response to Adorno.

[6] See Colin (43) for an explanation of the confusion surrounding the actual date of the poem.

students of German and Holocaust Studies, it has become a national symbol in postwar Germany. Nan Rosenthal explains, "It was anthologized in readers for students in high schools. [. . .] It was also set to music by numerous German composers and read on television programs. [. . .] To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988, 'Death Fugue' was read aloud in the Bundestag, the German parliament" (88).[7] In Germany, "Todesfuge" has thus survived as a kind of litany, a postwar symbol of penitence for the Holocaust—in Nan Rosenthal's words, a "national obsession" (88).

"Todesfuge"

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor lässt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng

Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen

Er ruft spielt süsser den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

"Death Fugue"

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night

[7] Celan reputedly hated that this protest poem might be understood as a reconciliation poem.

we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling he whistles his
hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground
he commands us play up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta
Your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there there you won't lie too cramped

He calls out jab this earth deeper you lot there you others sing up and play
he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so blue
jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margareta
your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his vipers

He calls out play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky
you will have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margareta
dein ashenes Haar Shulamith (Trans. Felstiner 31-32)

Celan's poem documents actual death camp practices in which orchestras comprised of Jewish prisoners were forced to play music while others dug graves that anticipated the immanent execution of prisoners, and sometimes of the orchestra players themselves. The title's ironic fusion of music and murder (Colin 45, Felstiner 33) demonstrates the real-world results of the Romantic attempt (as it was understood and appropriated by the Nazis) to achieve "heavenly" order on earth. This dissonance is evidenced in Celan's opening words, "Schwarz milch" ("black milk"), a toxification of nature and mother (Felstiner 33); it is echoed in the poem's almost song-like refrain that pairs the antipodal characters of Margarete and Sulamith, "dien goldenes Haar, Margarete/dein aschenes Haar, Sulamith." The repetition of these phrases evokes the recurrence of the horrifying events of the poem: the German soldier "spielt mit den Schlangen" ("plays with vipers") and waves "dem Eisen" ("the rod") from "im Gurt" ("his belt") in a display of masculine power that hints at a forbidden, unnatural knowledge. He commands the orchestra prisoners, "Er ruft spielt süsser den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland/er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die

Luft" ("play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland/he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke to the sky"). Although the prisoners are shot—"er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau" ("he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true")—the smoke, together with Sulamith's ashen hair, suggests as well the incineration of the prisoners, the "Grab in den Lüften" ("grave in the air"). In the evenings, the soldier writes to "Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete" ("Deutschland your golden hair/Margarete").[8]

The function of these characters within Celan's poem has been well established among critics. In his reference to Goethe's *Faust*, Celan summons Germany through its most celebrated Romantic writer. Sulamith, less discussed, is a Jewish Biblical reference. As Kiefer critics have noted, the women thus represent the two halves of German ethnicity. John Gilmour describes Sulamith as the counterpart to "the German heroine Margarete" (93); Matthew Biro writes, "'Margarete' stands for the idealized German woman—the 'golden haired,' absent partner to whom the man writes" (183); Mark Rosenthal adds, "By contrast, Shulamite is the Jewish woman, whose hair is black owing to her race, but ashen from burning" (96).

However, Kiefer critics seem to overlook some of the aspects of Goethe's *Faust* that make it so important to Celan's poem, and thereby fail to notice *Faust*'s possible relevance to Kiefer's work as well. Goethe's *Faust* might be described as narrating the tensions between earthly and heavenly ideals in much the same way that Romantic landscape painters melded "earthly" and "heavenly" visual perspectives. Goethe's protagonists Faust and Margarete embody this quest for the "sublime." Seduced by the Devil to exchange his soul for unnatural wisdom, Faust commits the most heinous of crimes and loses his love Margarete to the machinations of his own ambitions. However, whereas in earlier versions of the traditional story Faust was condemned to eternal damnation for his actions, Goethe's Faust is redeemed despite his destructive and selfish ambitions—or perhaps even because of them. Thus, Goethe's prologue compares the testing of Faust to God's testing of Job at the provocation of the Devil. This device further mitigates Faust's responsibility for his actions: it is not Faust's weakness, or even the Devil's scheming, that causes the tragedy, but God, who allows the test to take place at the expense of Margarete's corruption and death. Indeed, in some fashion, the Devil is God's invention, God's design to bring man into his fold, to make man active in his own salvation: "'Des Menschen Tätigkeit kann allzuleicht erschlaffen,/Er liebt sich bald die unbedingte Ruh;/Drum gib' ich gern ihm den Gesellen zu,/Der reizt und wirkt und muß als Teufel schaffen.—'" (*Prolog* 340-43; "'Man all too easily grows lax and mellow,/He soon elects repose at any price;/And so I like to pair him with a fellow/To play the Deuce, to stir, and to entice'" [trans. Arndt]). For Faust, the heavenly is revealed through its contrast with the earthly and sinful.

Faust's lover Margarete is similarly situated between the real world of sinners and the ideal world of saints. Although she comes to embody the path to eventual salvation, like Faust she must access it through her own corruption. In *Faust I*,

[8] Neither Goethe nor the Bible mentions the hair color of either character. For further discussion see Saltzman 28, Felstiner 36.

Margarete is the archetypal woman, a naïve village peasant who falls victim to the ambitions of her alchemical magician-lover. Believing Faust's promises, Margarete inadvertently kills her mother with a sleeping potion, is responsible for her brother's death while defending her (now dubious) honor, and is left pregnant and abandoned by Faust. As final testimony of her corruption, she drowns her own child. Mark Rosenthal, one of the only Kiefer critics to note the important detail of this murder, echoes many Goethe critics when he rationalizes that "love leads Margarete to be deceitful to her mother and to kill her own baby" (99). But Margarete does not kill her child for love; she kills her child out of desperation at being abandoned. A woman who elsewhere appears to be an ideal of maternity (see 1.3121-48, for example) commits infanticide and so becomes indisputably sinful and a compelling character precisely because of this sinfulness (see Mason 216, 240). Margarete's courage lies in the fact that, after she realizes her own guilt, she refuses to escape punishment even when Faust comes to rescue her from execution. She is thus saved from damnation because she places her trust in God's judgment instead of man's. Like Faust, she is redeemed and granted heavenly salvation both because of her return to piety and because the magnitude of her earthly sins allows her to glimpse the greatness of God's forgiveness.

Goethe's translation of Margarete into the realm of the heavenly is considerably magnified in the allegorical *Faust II*: Margarete is now a heavenly spirit—"die eine büsserin, sonst Gretchen [Margarete] genannt" (a "penitent, else called Gretchen [Margarete]")—who is able to intervene on Faust's behalf at the moment of his death:

> Alles Vergängliche
> Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
> Das Unzulängliche,
> Hier wird's Ereignis;
> Das Unbeschreibliche,
> Hier ist's getan;
> Das Ewig-Weibliche
> Zieht uns hinan. (Part II.5.7.12104-12111)
>
> All that is changeable
> Is but refraction;
> The unattainable
> Here becomes action;
> Human discernment
> Here is passed by;
> Woman Eternal
> Draws us on high. (trans. Arndt)

As a manifestation of the "Ewig-Weibliche" or "Woman Eternal," Margarete makes it possible for Faust to be saved, despite his sins, rather than condemned to eternal damnation (see Schweitzer 135). As Mark Rosenthal observes, "Goethe depicts women as the sacred preservers of moral values, who are undone and destroyed by the male 'us,' but still can be redeemed and subsequently save 'us'" (99). Indeed, Margarete's self-sacrifice in *Faust I* is esteemed so greatly in Goethe's *Faust II* that her redemption enables her to play a role that rivals that of the Virgin Mary.[9]

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[9] As Dye writes, "Margarete is a Madonna, indeed a *mater dolorosa*," adding, "but this does not

In their reading of Celan's poem, Kiefer critics have missed the very aspects of Margarete that distinguish her from the Madonna, even if Goethe collapses the two. For Celan, Margarete—woman, Germany—is not an innocent, idealized heroine, but rather a tainted one. While she is a compelling character who comes to repent her actions (as Germany repents its actions), to characterize Celan's Margarete as the "German heroine" or "the idealized German woman" is misleading. Given that Goethe's Margarete kills her child ("Germany's" future), we should wonder to what degree Margarete shares responsibility for the sadism that is enacted on the body of Sulamith when we consider her role in Celan's poem. Is it Margarete's implicit or spoken bidding, or Germany's, or his own, to which the soldier responds with such anger against Sulamith? And to what degree are these commands distinguishable? Like Goethe's Margarete, Celan's Margarete is complicit in murder, and, as such, she becomes in his poem the appropriate symbolic bearer of "Schwarze Milch" to Germany's children.[10] Whereas Goethe implied that no one is unsalvageable (see Mason 232), Celan gives no indication that Margarete asks for forgiveness and no hint of redemption. Even so, Margarete is not the real villain of the poem. Her responsibility for the death camp horrors in Celan's poem—however serious—pales in comparison to that of her brutal German soldier-lover.

The tradition of Sulamith—a name that means woman of Shulam or Jewish woman (see Felstiner 38)—is important both for its emphasis on the overcoming of differences through love and her status as an earthly ideal. The Old Testament Song of Songs portrays an erotic love-story between its narrator, presumed to be Solomon, and the beautiful "Shulamite," a woman among his Jerusalem harem. She comes from a poor family, but nonetheless becomes the favorite wife of her royal husband. After an unexplained lovers' rift, Sulamith reconciles with her husband in a garden of earthly delight. The story is typically viewed as a call to the purity and wonder of monogamous, sensual life, with the marriage of the two lovers representing—depending on the interpreter—differences in race, class, and/or religion overcome by means of a passionate, loving marriage. Within the story, Sulamith's ability quickly to forgive is a marker of her embodiment as a "bridge," the loving and merciful means by which differences are overcome.

Because she serves in this symbolic capacity as an "earthly" ideal, Sulamith, like Margarete, became important to the Romantic investigation of the sublime, particularly among the *Lukasbund* (or Nazarene) painters (see also, Felstiner 38, 298 n43). In 1811, just prior to his death from consumption, Franz Pforr finished his last painting, *Shulamit und Maria* (*Sulamith and Maria*; figure 4), allegorizing his friendship with fellow artist Johann Friedrich Overbeck.[11] In the tradition

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explain why she, the other penitents, and the Virgin Mary are peculiarly suited to lead us onward. Nor does the point that [both figures have] lost a child make an infanticide into the sister of the Virgin Mary" (107). Of course, Faust's unusual perseverance in his quest, however evil, is also crucial to his salvation. As the angels confirm, "'Wer immer strebend sich bemüht,/Den können wir erlösen'" (Part II, 5.11936-37; "'whoever strives in ceaseless toil,/Him we may grant redemption'" [trans. Arndt]).

[10] Felstiner disagrees with this reading (33). Colin also remarks upon it (43).

[11] My heartfelt thanks to William Sherwin Simmons of the University of Oregon for pointing out these drawings and paintings to me, and for his help with early drafts of this essay. In comparison

Figure 4: Franz Pforr, *Sulamith und Maria* [*Sulamith and Maria*], 1811.
Oil on wood 34.5 x 32 cm. Museum Georg Schäfer, Schweinfurt.

of the *Lukasbund*, the diptych is based on a 10-chapter fairytale Pforr invented about two sisters, Sulamith and Maria, marrying two artists.[12] The darker haired Sulamith sits in the midst of a sunny garden filled with irises while feeding her child a pomegranate, a fruit often used to represent longevity and immortality. In the diptych, she is a maternal, even Mary-like figure, represented in the Italian artistic tradition of Raphael, which was preferred by Overbeck; thus, the setting

with painters like Caspar David Friedrich, the Nazarenes have garnered little recent attention, but they were in their time an important school of German Romanticism. Moreover, the dialectic between their work and Goethe's is echoed in the art of Celan and Kiefer. See particularly Vaughan 164-65, 172-75.

[12] In Pforr's fairytale, the father, Joseph, names his daughters when he opens the Bible to pray at their births. Although he chooses names that reflect a Jewish and Christian ideal for his fairytale and subsequent paintings, there is nothing in the story or the paintings to indicate that Pforr associates "Sulamith" with Jewish ethnicity, except in the sense that, as an Old Testament figure, she serves as a precursor to the New Testament Mary. Although one of Klopstock's Odes may also have been a source for Pforr's and Overbeck's interest in the figure of Sulamith, I have been unable to confirm this. As part of the performative process, Pforr and Overbeck gave the artists of his fairytale the same names by which they called each other within their group, thus confirming the biographical aspect of these works.

emphasizes the pastoral Italian city in the background.[13] Behind her, a figure resembling Overbeck serenely enters the garden, his hands clasped in a manner almost prayerful. However, in contrast to the Virginal Mary, who usually sits alone in a closed garden, Pforr's Sulamith, like her namesake, finds physical pleasure in her "garden": Pforr pairs her with Overbeck, auspiciously aligning his friend with the long-lasting, monogamous, but sensual marriage depicted in the Song of Songs. Thus, Pforr's Sulamith represents Southern pastoral purity, Italian Renaissance artistry, and the call to worldly happiness and satisfaction.

On the other half of the diptych, Maria—whose name evokes the virginal Christian mother—sits in a dark interior, reading as she plaits her blond hair. Maria's knitting in the basket beside her testifies to her propriety and industry. Above her in the rafters, swallows, representing eternal returns and rebirth, sit beside a golden cross, and connect Maria and Northern artistry, like that of Dürer, to a Christian ideal of resurrection. Pforr's Maria thus possesses the more "heavenly" aspects of the Madonna. While the Overbeck figure's entry into Sulamith's garden bespeaks Pforr's prophesy of love and life for his friend, Pforr's own worldly future is more fleeting. For, according to William Vaughan, Pforr's access to his own imaginary, chaste mistress comes only through the mediation of a small gray cat, which bears his visage. That the artist is nowhere visible as a man in the diptych, Vaughan suggests, foreshadows of his own early death and anticipates Christian resurrection. The work thus serves as an intensely personal farewell, one "painted as a sign of friendship 'only for Overbeck'" (Frank 16).[14]

Overbeck responded to Pforr's image with an image of his own that also originally featured Sulamith and Maria, as we know from his 1811-12 drawing, *Sulamith und Maria* (*Sulamith and Maria*; figure 5). Borrowing heavily from Pforr, Overbeck's darker Italianate Sulamith and lighter Germanic Maria still wear elaborate dresses that reflect Pforr's meticulous costumes. Overbeck's Maria also glances fervently at her friend, though she becomes more active in this desire, finally clasping the more timid Sulamith's hand and leaning closer to her. Even in this early sketch, Overbeck dispenses with the complications of the women's marriages to two men and transfers his attention to the intimacy between the two women themselves.

All of these modifications remain in the completed painting that was to become Overbeck's most famous work. But the finished painting, incomplete until 1828, was retitled *Italia und Germania* (*Italy and Germany*; figure 6)—a renaming that transforms the two women and "rival muses" into icons of national artistry (see Heise 68). In keeping with Pforr's precedent, the background behind Italia suggests rural and pastoral simplicity, complete with a small church, whereas the landscape behind Germania is urban and gothic, with an enormous cathedral spire and complex city. If the Old Testament Sulamith gives way to the New Testament Maria in Pforr's work, the genius of Italian Renaissance artistry paves the

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[13] Judith Ryan first called my attention to the connections between Pforr's Old Testament Sulamith and the New Testament Virgin Mary.

[14] Although I have seen nothing to suggest that the relationship between Pforr and Overbeck was anything other than platonic, the two women who serve as "stand ins" for their relationship, especially in Overbeck's painting, seem to express desire for each other.

Figure 5: Friedrich Overbeck, *Sulamith und Maria* [*Sulamith and Maria*], 1811-12.
Black chalk and charcoal, 91.7 x 102.2 cm.
Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt Lübeck.

way for German Romanticism in Overbeck's. Sulamith—even as she comes to embody Italia—remains linked with a kind of symbolic and historic bridge, a space by which one can cross cultural, national, and even gender barriers.[15] For the *Lukasbund*, the pairing of the merciful Sulamith and the merciful Maria is nothing short of perfect kinship, a unification of earthly and heavenly ideals. But significantly, whereas Goethe substitutes an earthly figure (Margarete) for a heavenly ideal (Maria) in a biblically revisionist manner, the *Lukasbund* remains committed to the ideal of a heavenly Maria, with Sulamith as an earthly analogue. They thereby use their art to glorify a traditional Christianity in which one works to avoid sin rather than embracing sin as human and natural.

Celan's use of the names Sulamith and Margarete suggests that he may have been aware of the Romantic dialectic at work between Goethe and the *Lukasbund*.[16] As Pforr and Overbeck did before him, Celan couples Sulamith with a distinc-

[15] The Biblical story of Sulamith already suggests gender differences overcome through a loving (heterosexual) marriage, but the fact that both Pforr and Overbeck use two women's friendship to represent their own love for each other is suggestive of a kind of gender performance at work among Nazarene paintings and in Kiefer's work.

[16] When Kurt Bräutigan "asks if 'Todesfuge' isn't under way to human understanding [*Verständigung*]? . . . Won't [Sulamite and Margarete] once again extend their hands to each other?" (cited in Glenn 70; brackets and elipses are Glenn's), the image of a Sulamith and Margarete "once again extend[ing] their hands to each other" is evocative of Overbeck's *Sulamith and Maria*.

Figure 6: Friedrich Overbeck, *Italia und Germania* [*Italy and Germany*], 1828.
Oil on canvas, 94 x 104.3 cm.
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

tively Germanic figure—one who, like Sulamith, embodies an earthly ideal. But for Celan this insistence on earthly ideals and their real-world outcomes serves to dispel Romantic aspirations. Celan's poem thereby revises the *Lukasbund* painting, insisting on Goethe's implied exchange of Margarete for the Virgin Mary. In stark contrast to the erotic lover of Solomon, and in contrast as well to the loving wife and mother in Pforr's painting, Celan's Sulamith is a Holocaust victim whose only freedom is "ein Grab in den Lüften." Furthermore, she is paired not with a Maria-like figure of heavenly mercy, but with a repentant Christian murderess. In exchanging Overbeck's Maria for Goethe's Margarete, Celan insists on a jarring juxtaposition of figures whose opposition is akin to that of other pairs in the poem: "death" and "fugue," "black" and "milk," "poetry" and "Auschwitz." In a bitter reversal of their traditional roles, Celan's Margarete is earthbound and incapable of salvation; his Sulamith is sky-bound, but not heavenly. In this sense, Celan's use of these names enhances the angry and sardonic voice of his narrator, who is unable to forgive a sinner whom Germans, and Kiefer critics as well, often see as a saint.

And yet, despite his evident sorrow and fury, Celan does not altogether reject the bond between the women, or the Romantic heritage that once implicitly placed these figures side by side. Although the Margarete and Sulamith pairing in "Todesfuge" is ironic, "the two women are inseparable" (M. Rosenthal 96), particularly

if we take into account the actions of the German soldier. He writes in the evenings to his golden-haired lover Margarete in Germany, while he brutalizes Sulamith, whose hair, once dark, is now ashen. Perhaps in juxtaposing the two women Celan attempts to address the utterly inexplicable contradiction between the tenderness expressed by the German soldier, the *Meister*, when writing to his beloved, and the sadistic cruelty he enacts upon Sulamith in his camp. How is it that otherwise good people can have been complicit in and committed such atrocities (see also Langer 12)? Celan offers in "Todesfuge" at least one possible answer: that the same Romantic dichotomies that allow for the fetishization and objectification of Margarete in some measure sanction the dehumanization of the prisoners the soldier guards. Sulamith's destruction becomes a more destructive manifestation of the soldier's relationship with Margarete. In referencing not only Goethe but also the *Lukasbund*, Celan further hints at the eventual death of Margarete-as-Germania, German art, as an epilogue to the death of Sulamith. He thus maintains the symbolic analogue, and reminds us, even as his poetry denies it, that art after Auschwitz is impossible.

Thus, in the tradition of Klaus Theweleit, "Todesfuge" blames German masculinity for the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. In answer to Goethe's Romantic "Woman Eternal," who offers the possibility of salvation, Celan's poem suggests that Germany's cult of the masculine has utterly destroyed its feminine half. As such, Celan's Margarete may be, as is Faust's Margarete, a victim, and, if so, Celan creates the possibility of an ideological connection between the women even as his poem elsewhere insists on that connection's utter impossibility. Even through her death the ashen Sulamith continues unhappily to bind German and Jew in a terrible history that neither can relinquish. It is perhaps because of this inseparability, despite Celan's adamant claims to the contrary, that his poem has been read as conciliatory since its publication.

I want to suggest that it is precisely this dialectical reading of Celan's "Todesfuge" to which Anselm Kiefer is so highly attuned, and to which his mesmerizing paintings of *Margarete* and *Sulamith* respond, while also transforming Celan's efforts in potentially troubling ways. In the variant of *Dein goldenes Haar, Margarete* included here (figure 7),[17] Margarete is rendered as a desiccated, furrowed field with an arching bow of golden straw that evokes a woman's long hair. In this way Kiefer's *Margarete* hearkens back to Goethe's earthy, peasant protagonist.[18] Once again, Margarete is squandered fertility—here the burnt and ravaged remains of German lands, wintry and scorched in the aftermath of World War II. Unlike Celan, Kiefer clearly establishes Germany itself, Margarete herself, as one of the

[17] Kiefer created about 30 variants of these works in 1981 alone.

[18] With this comparison, Kiefer also uses *Margarete* to point to a certain absurdity to the notion of Germany as earth. How does one claim the earth as German gentile rather than Jew? To what degree should we imagine that the "earth" is really at fault for the Holocaust? Because of Kiefer's tendency toward this kind universalization—loss of Margarete is a loss of the earth is a loss of Germany is a loss of art—his work is somewhat gentler in its condemnation of Margarete than Celan's "Todesfuge." And of course such universalizing begs a key question: how accountable does Kiefer hold German art? Is it no more complicit than the earth or the heavens for its uses?

Figure 7: *Dein goldenes Haar, Margarete* [*Your Golden Hair, Margarete*], 1981.
130 x 170 cm, oil and straw on canvas. Collection Sanders, Amsterdam.

victims of the Holocaust, if also a perpetrator. In this bleak devastation, Kiefer's Margarete becomes once more the compelling sinner led astray despite her good intentions, a Germany repentant and justifiably punished for its passion for a madman. Kiefer thus reinscribes Margarete as a kind of tragic Romantic heroine.

But neither is Kiefer dismissive of Margarete's guilt, which he links to the downfall of art. While there is no titular reference to Sulamith, her absence visibly haunts Margarete in the dark shapes and shadows throughout the painting. Kiefer's landscapes evoke both the violent history enacted upon the German earth and the violent tradition of which German Romantic landscape painting is a part. As Daniel Arasse points out, Keifer's furrowed fields echo with eerie precision paintings such as Werner Peiner's *German Land*, with its views of farmers plowing their fields. Though Arasse recognizes the "high horizons, showing nothing but bare, spoilt or burnt earth" as a telling aspect of Kiefer's allusion both to the German Romantic landscape tradition and his earnest reflection of the results of its appropriation by the National Socialists (120-21), he remains troubled by parallels between the works. In his view, Kiefer's topographies "bear a deceptively close resemblance to some German works of the 1930s, so close that they might be thought to be a direct source of inspiration" (120-21).

Indeed, as Mark Rosenthal has suggested, a troubling "ambivalence" remains in the Margarete images (99), an ambivalence evident not only in Kiefer's artistic engagement with various forms of Nazi propaganda, but also in the Romantic perspective of the landscapes, the very spaces where the earthly and heavenly meet. As he explains, "In [Kiefer's landscape paintings], we experience the earth as if our faces were pushed close to the soil and, at the same time, as if we were

flying above the ground, but close to it" (32). This explanation echoes almost exactly the perspective Koerner identified in Friedrich's *Der Wanderer*: "we are left uncertain whether we stand on solid ground behind the summit, or whether we float in space with the clouds." Thus, as with the appropriation of the taboo *Sieg Heil* gesture in the *Besetzungen* series, both Rosenthal (implicitly) and Arasse (explicitly) point to Kiefer's willful revival in landscapes like *Margarete* of artistic forms proscribed since the end of World War II. In challenging this taboo, Kiefer expresses an ambition to reclaim the greatness of German art even as he acknowledges the impossibility of such a neo-Romantic resuscitation in post-Holocaust Germany. Unlike Celan's poem, Kiefer's *Margarete* performs an act of mourning not only for Germany, but also for the very German art that "Todesfuge" repelled.

Certainly, Kiefer's *Sulamith* paintings have been read as an act of mourning. In contrast to the *Margarete* paintings, the majority of Kiefer's earlier *Sulamith* paintings are more obviously figurative, some, as in *Dein aschenes Haar, Sulamit* (figure 8), indisputably so.[19] In these images, a naked woman sits almost enveloped by her long black and white streaked hair. True to the origins of the word "Sulamith," this figure serves as metonymy for the race of Jewish peoples in Kiefer's work. Sulamith's nudity here starkly contrasts with the lavishly dressed Sulamiths in Pforr's and Overbeck's paintings. When paired with her ravaged appearance and near-fetal position—a position that may link her implicitly to Margarete's infanticide—this nudity proclaims Sulamith's vulnerability and victimization with much of the tragic solemnity of Celan's poem. It evokes not only the humiliation of concentration camps where naked prisoners were often exposed to the degrading scrutiny of their overseers, but also—given the eroticism of the Biblical Sulamith—a symbolic violation, a rape.[20] In contrast to Overbeck's Sulamith, Kiefer's Sulamith now sits on her half of the painting alone, her Christian sister gone, and, with her, the hope of spiritual resurrection that might have been suggested by Maria's presence. Behind her lies a strange, turbid cityscape that echoes the *Lukasbund* tradition but cannot be identified fully either with the gothic spires of German Christendom or with the synagogues of Judaism; rather, it represents the hollowed remnants of German cities in the aftermath of World War II.

For Kiefer, Sulamith's death is also linked to an absent artistic tradition. If in "Todesfuge" Celan implicitly foretold of Sulamith's death as an evolution of Margarete's Romanticism, Kiefer's art serves as witness to the veracity of this prophecy and its attendant: Sulamith's death means the death of German art. That Kiefer alludes to Overbeck's painting suggests that the missing Germania involves not only a lost friendship but also a lost German artistic tradition, an iconoclasm resulting from the Holocaust that has decimated first Sulamith and then

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[19] Although Kiefer's 1983 *Sulamith* is the best known of these paintings, he created many related versions in 1981, entitled *Dein aschenes Haar, Sulamith.* This paper deals with these earlier works since they were exhibited at the same time as Kiefer's *Margarete* paintings. To date, Kiefer has dropped his work on *Margarete* and focuses only on *Sulamith.*

[20] I do not want to suggest overmuch the actual rape of Jewish prisoners. Theweleit expresses his surprise that while Nazi soldiers took pleasure in killing women who fought against them, rape was a rare event. He credits Nazi repugnance for sexuality and its reliance on male homosocial camaraderie as the reason (153-55).

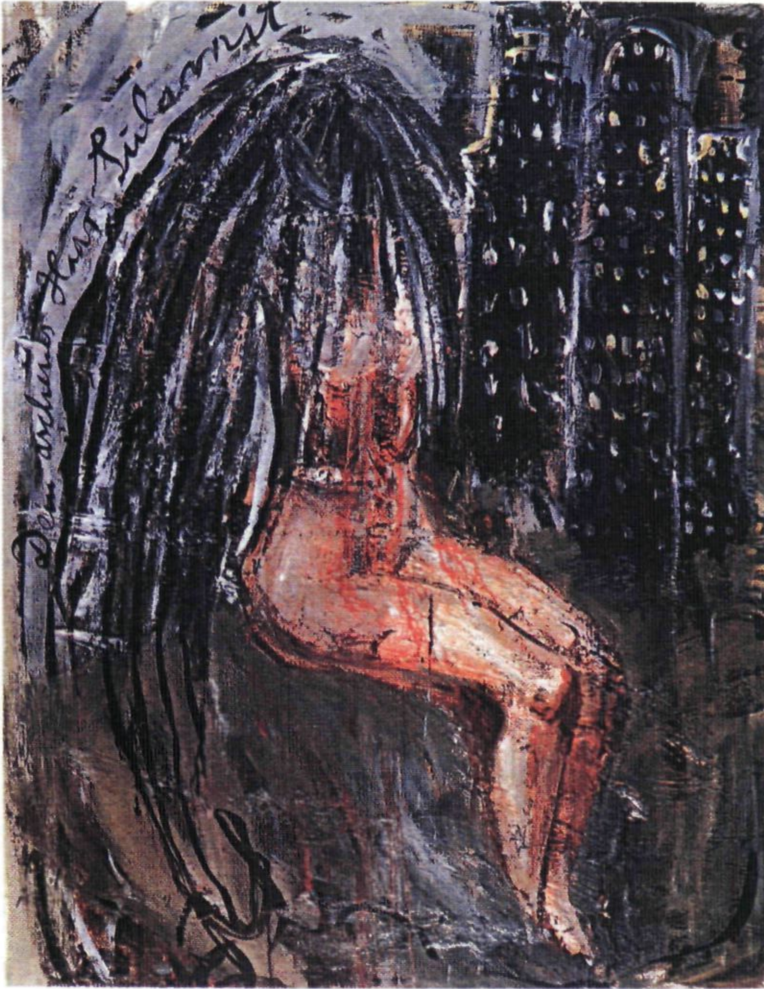

Figure 8: *Dein aschenes Haar, Sulamit* [*Your Ashen Hair, Sulamith*], 1981.
170 x 130 cm, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Margarete. Whereas Overbeck evoked the two highest artistic traditions in his paintings, in *Sulamit* Kiefer speaks of the death of Sulamith (the Holocaust) as Germany's only artistic inheritance. Kiefer thus complicates Celan's mourning for the loss of Sulamith by linking it with a lament for the loss of German art. Through these paradoxes, Kiefer raises some important questions: What does such a conflation of the death of Sulamith and the death of German art imply? Can Kiefer legitimately mourn both? Though Kiefer's *Margarete* and *Sulamit* are mourned in two separate paintings, the absence of each in each other's paintings is made palpably present. Though they are still linked, the sisterly twinning of Margarete and Sulamith is no more possible in Kiefer's paintings than it was in Celan's poem. But if Celan's invocation of Margarete paired with Sulamith is ironic and jarring, Kiefer's invocation of the two women both acknowledges their

inseparability and expresses sadness, rather than anger, at the devastation that such a pairing historically has meant to each.

Indeed, the continued dialectic—both between the two paintings and between the paintings and Celan's poem—seems once more to emulate a Romantic ideal satirized in Celan's "Todesfuge": a pairing of opposites—blond and brunette, good and evil, salvation and damnation—that leads to a sublime, higher "truth." For Celan, this pairing shows the pitfalls of Romanticism. For Kiefer, it affirms the ambivalences and struggles of German art—the very characteristics that make it potentially destructive and, because of that destructiveness, potentially redemptive. In its ambivalence, its epic scale and themes, its ambitions somehow to bear the cultural burden of the Holocaust, its emergent popularity to the point of fanaticism and "cult"—Kiefer's work emphatically reclaims the possibility for greatness in German art, even as the bleakness of his works testifies to his awareness of the precariousness of this artistic quest.

Despite the neo-Romantic teleology at work in *Margarete* and *Sulamith*, however, Kiefer has left us surprisingly bereft of heroes and villains. Celan's German soldier is absent, as is Goethe's Faust. Why is there no *Rückenfigur* who might "mediate" our experience? Kiefer omits the farmer, the alchemist, the Nazi. The weight of these figures is perhaps once more borne by a heroic artist who still successfully blends earthly and heavenly perspectives in *Margarete*, and who still sees the possibility of German art, despite and because of its Nazi appropriation. But this figure, as Kiefer has aptly demonstrated with his *Besetzungen* and *Für Genet* photographs, is also an emphatically ambivalent one: shaman or Nazi, *Lukasbund* artist or Goethe, God or Mephistopheles. Whereas Celan ultimately rejects Goethe's Romantic principles and credits the potency of masculinity only in its destructive power, Kiefer's work reembraces these Romantic traditions and insists that the masculine artist, as Nazi and/or shaman, can mourn, can rescue Germania, can salvage and resurrect the remnants of German art. As we understand the fears of critics at the Venice Biennale, we should also understand Kiefer's ambitions and hopes and admire the complexity and intelligence of his work. But given his rich engagement with Romantic traditions, we should not confuse Kiefer's "good" art with "good" politics. As critics, it is our responsibility to take note of Kiefer's risks as well as his successes.

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