



**The Palette of Anselm Kiefer:  
Witnessing our Imperiled World**

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Anselm Kiefer was born in Germany in 1945, in a country rebuilding itself from the ashes of war and redefining its place in history. His early work directly addressed the silence and denial that existed in Germany about the unbridled aggression of WWII including the unimaginable violence and decimation of the Holocaust. However he soon expanded these themes into extensive ideological, spiritual, and psychological investigations. His monumental canvases and installations have become multi-leveled experiences that persistently reflect not only the horrific past of his homeland but also more ancient and universal human concerns about life and death, good and evil. Attending intensely to this dialogue between history and myth, Kiefer can be seen, in Jungian terms, to be addressing the relationship between human reality and the archetypal realms.

In this paper, we concentrate upon one particular expression of this relationship between human reality and archetypal forces, namely our human relationship to the archetype of creation-destruction, as it is woven throughout Kiefer's work. As we will clarify, we see Kiefer boldly facing the manifestations of the split off negative pole of this archetype, the terrifying waste left in the wake of the force of destruction. Yet he consistently does this without losing sight of the presence of the creative force.

Kiefer's work is compelling to us because we think that at this point in our own country, the United States, it is essential that we develop a deeper capacity to face the archetype of destruction. From a classical Jungian point of view, to the extent that we do not face an archetypal force, it will be dictating our behavior; we will act it out or collusively support its being acted out. It appears to us that, as a culture, we readily turn from an examination of self and psyche, preferring a

confident bravado supported by a sense of entitlement and often unquestioned omnipotence. Accordingly, over the years, it has been said in many places that we are a culture of narcissism, arrested in our development with youthful traits that are characteristic of adolescence; bold, brash and inventive as well as self-centered and self-indulgent, and lacking in empathy. (Lasch, 1991). We are suggesting that presently we are, as a country, in the grip of dynamics we call Alpha Narcissism. In this particular expression of narcissism, omnipotence and exhibitionism are fueled by aggression rooted in the archetype of destruction. In our book, *The Matrix and Meaning of Character*, we differentiate between three forms of narcissism, each rooted in a different archetypal landscape. (Dougherty and West, 2007) Given our unconsciousness of the current predominance of alpha dynamics in our country, we feel that it is essential that we face the specific archetypal force underlying this particular form of narcissism. Such an active exploration of the terrifying force of destruction has the potential to lead to the development of a conscious and responsible relationship to this force. It is this dedication that leads us to be especially interested in Kiefer's images, in particular, his capacity to imagine - and portray - the archetypal landscape that expresses this reality. As we proceed in this paper, you will see that Kiefer's work naturally is woven out of and upon the German psyche and culture. But his reach into the archetypal domain renders these explorations invaluable to us in our reflections upon our own unconscious tendencies to act out or collude with aggression.

As a young art student of 24, Kiefer took a series of controversial photographs of himself in an SS uniform making the Sieg Heil while standing

amidst various monuments and ruins throughout Europe and finally facing into the sea *Nazi Salute* (1969). Not yet aware of the levels of meanings here, some art critics thought this to be Neo-Nazi art. However with reflection, we can see



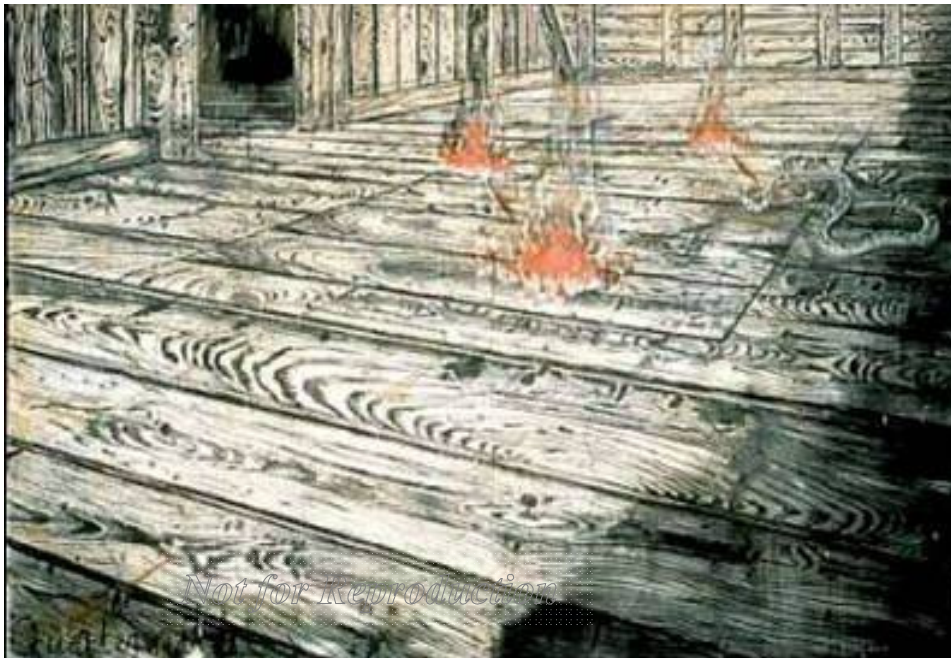
**Figure 1** *Nazi Salute* (1969)

these images as Kiefer's first expression of his determination to develop an awareness of the madness personified by the Nazis and the madness and violence within history. In these images, Hitler becomes a strangely pathetic figure, but one whose delusional folly imposed unimaginably cruel designs upon the world. Kiefer, putting himself into this uniform, and into the salute, and into "occupations" of various European landmarks puts himself directly into the

experience that he is attempting to explore and reveal. Very much as Jung does, Kiefer insists that consciousness of evil requires an ever-evolving immersion in the experience, as well as reflection and awareness.

Kiefer compiled many of these images in a handmade book titled *Images of the Heroic*. Numerous books created during these years, made of various papers - incorporating photos, collages, and watercolors - set the stage for his continuing to create books, mostly of an inordinate scale, made of various materials, most notably lead as will be noted below. The book form itself is a multi-leveled reference to memory and history, knowledge and intellect, both accessible and inaccessible.

In the early 1970's, working in a barren wooden studio near the legendary Black Forest Kiefer painted a series called the Attic paintings. In one of this series, a painting called *Quaternity* we see the beginnings of Kiefer's engagement with vast mythic and moral concepts. The problem of the three-and-one is



**Figure 2** *Quaternity* (1973)

portrayed as a series of three flames bursting through his studio floor, faced by a coiled snake entering from the shadows on the right. Within the smoke rising from the flames, the artist has written Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In this image of the mythic conundrum of the Trinity, Kiefer introduces the fourth element, a snake, representing Satan. He is quite clearly wrestling with the moral conflict inherent in a Trinitarian deity that tolerates the existence of evil. In this painting, Kiefer presents Satan, or evil, as an insistent presence in the spiritual matrix.

Kiefer in an interview, says, "History has shown us that there is always a darkness inside the light...Maybe we should be looking more carefully into the

darkness.” (Auping, 2005, p. 35). It is this act of looking carefully into the darkness that we feel makes Kiefer’s work both compelling and tremendously valuable for us at this point in time. As we will see, he time and time again portrays the archetypal force of destruction without splitting off the force of creation. In this particular work we sense that the flames that burst into the studio threatening ruin, are also symbolic of a potentially creative spiritual presence - a presence that illuminates. Simultaneously, creation and destruction are part of the same process.

In the 70’s and the early 80’s, Kiefer produced a number of images featuring an image of the artist’s palette. Again and again, he returns to study how art can become not only a creative expression of the artist but also an image caught in a web of psychological and cultural controversy and destruction. The palette is frequently portrayed as an outline through which we view a landscape - of earth and heaven, of ravaged fields, or of decaying buildings reminiscent of grand Nazi structures. At times, it is held by an angel, suggesting the inspirational presence of a muse. At one point, it appears as a sculpture with wings. Each of these images reflect Kiefer’s ponderings about the role and impact of the artist.

In an early one of these explorations, *Heaven-Earth* (1974), a palette is outlined in front of a landscape; inscribed above is “heaven”, at the bottom of the palette is “earth” and along an axis connecting the two is “painter”. The artist in this case “resides” along, or provides the function of, the world’s axis or the axis mundi, holding the tension between heaven and earth. In Jungian terms we refer to the ego-Self axis as an axis mundi between consciousness and the archetypal.

(Edinger,1972) Interestingly, -'pala'- the Roman root of the word palette, signifies the earth's axis, as in the word Palatium, a sacred hill in Rome thought to be the world axis. The palette is so important to Kiefer's artistic vision, that in many of his studios he has a sculpture of a palette hanging from the ceiling, and one underfoot, on the floor. (Auping, 2005, p.34)

Yet, Kiefer also pondered about the power of the artist to set the world aflame, to truly destroy as well as create, both historically and psychologically. In the large painting, titled *Nero Paints*, (1974) we can see a barren and devastated landscape with

buildings on fire in the background, almost obscured by a blood red, crudely-drawn artist's palette. Nero, like Hitler was an artist-emperor who painted while his empire burned,



**Figure 3** *Nero Paints* (1974)

seemingly oblivious to the cost of human suffering. Four delicately drawn paintbrushes that wield powerful flames rather than paint, suggest that both Nero's and Hitler's artistic temperament rendered death and decay as both the Roman and German empire degenerated into slaughter. Yet we can also sense that the paint brush flames have a spiritual potentiality. In this way, Kiefer comments on the brutal use of power in the hands of psychopathic tyrants,

without losing sight of the creative potential within their “tools.” One can also sense that Kiefer is suggesting that the artist’s brush has the power within it to illuminate the slaughter. Furthermore, the palette itself is soaked in blood and flame, both portraying and being the reality of what is imaged. We see again, that clearly, for Kiefer, experience and image, historical lesson and emotional response are not separate.

In 1980, Kiefer created another handmade book of 34 pages, titled *Iconoclastic Controversies*. In this work, he continues his exploration of the bivalent power of art. Kiefer’s images here address the historical position of those who argue for the limitation if not obliteration of image - including orthodox Judaism and the Islamic caliphs who went so far as to burn the books of the Alexandrian library, a move that presaged Hitler’s notorious bonfires of books. This directly relates to Kiefer’s continuing representations of books - as images of art - and thus as statements about the essential value of image. Lopez-Pedraza (1996), a Venezuelan Jungian analyst writing about Kiefer, suggests that Kiefer’s concern with Iconoclasm is about its move to suppress or limit image, including the historical movement away from polytheism to monotheism, as a reaction to the inherent power of image to drive one mad. We would say such suppression is a reaction to the power of image to constellate the multiple forces of the archetypal realms and Kiefer perseveres in his approach to just these forces.

Burning or burnt furrowed fields stretching towards the horizon is an image we see repeatedly in Kiefer’s vocabulary. These fields are a complex metaphor that refers to the Nazi’s scorched earth policy. We can also experience these images as the burnt fields in our own psyches; they lead off into the



horizon, joining the darkened sky. Yet these war torn, ravaged fields can also be seen as a cauterization of an infected landscape - again historically and/or psychologically. Kiefer titles one such painting *Nigredo*, (1984) referring to the alchemical metaphor of blackening. Dead apparently worthless residue is the stuff of the nigredo. In this painting, the landscape appears to be heavy, oppressed, even paralyzed; sitting in the foreground appear to be huge immobile boulders. Yet we know that the nigredo is one essential step in the alchemical

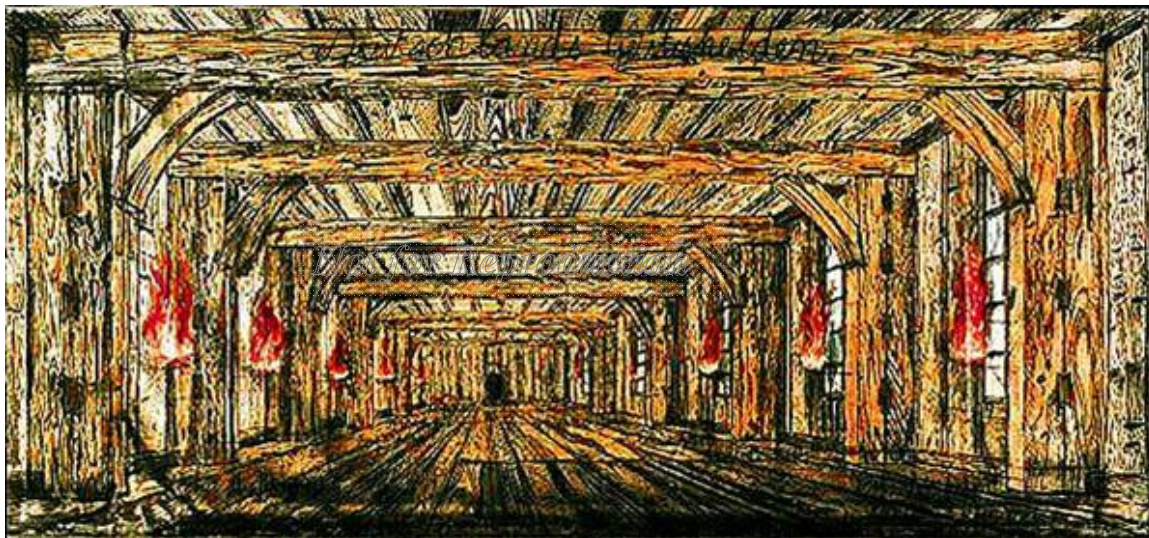


**Figure 4 *Nigredo* (1984)**

process; destruction reigns, but not without the allusion to the potentially purifying force of fire. Jung states that, “Alchemy represents the projection of a drama both cosmic and spiritual in laboratory terms. The opus magnum had 2 aims: the rescue of the human soul and the salvation of the cosmos....This work is difficult and strewn with obstacles; the alchemical opus is dangerous. Right at the beginning, you meet the dragon, the chthonic spirit, the devil, or as the

alchemists called it, the blackness, the nigredo, and this encounter produces suffering.” (Jung, *C.G. Jung Speaking*, 1977, p 228f.)

In *To the Unknown Painter* (1982) we see an image of the monumental stage designed by the famous Nazi architect Albert Speers. Again we see an artist’s palette in the midst of this building that is immense in scale and dark in its purpose. Thin and relatively minute in scale, this palette sits on a tripod, in the center of this highly-charged historic setting, boldly mediating between heaven and earth, an image of the artist’s capacity to stand inside and reflect upon the experience of the Nazi regime.



**Figure 5** *Germany’s Spiritual Heroes (1973)*

It is with this boldness that Kiefer painted this image titled *Germany’s Spiritual Heroes*, 1973. Combining the forms of his former studio in the rural schoolhouse with the forms of monumental Nazi architecture, Kiefer layers historical meaning on a setting of personal significance. We’re thus required to experience a massive hall as a personal event - we’re required to consider our place in this history. Eternal fires burn along the wall as if in memory of the

German literary, philosophical, and political heroes whose names are inscribed on the columns. The right lower edge of the painting is darkened and has been singed. It appears that this highly combustible wooden room is in danger of going up in flames, and with it Germany and its heroes will be destroyed. “This suggests that these heroes are in fact transitory and their deeply felt ideals are vulnerable... This work is not only ambivalent but also sharply biting and ironical...these great figures and their achievements are reduced to just names, recorded not in a marble edifice but in the attic of a rural schoolhouse.”

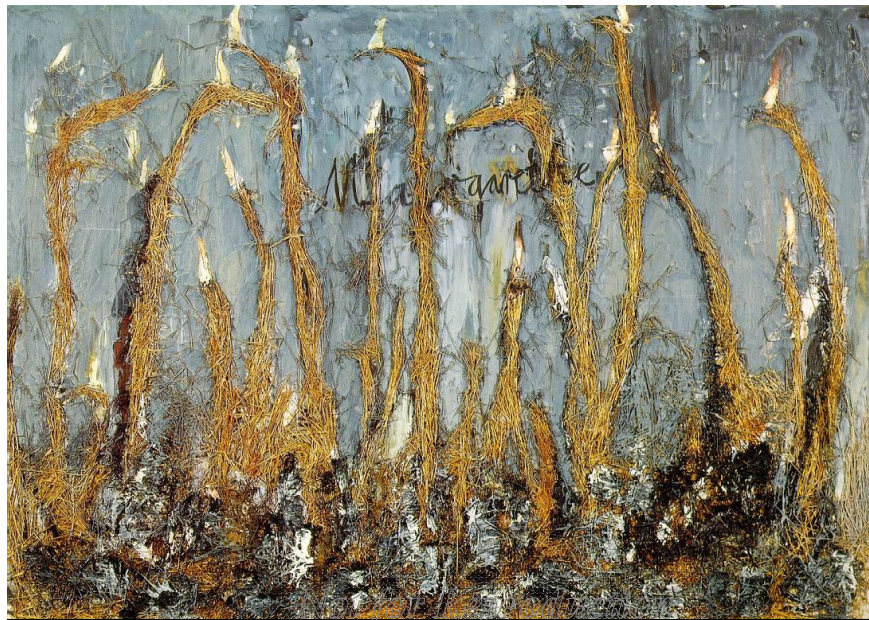
(Rosenthal, Mark, 1987)

In this image Kiefer is confronting Hitler’s manipulative use of German cultural history, rendering the traditions of the great German thinkers, artists, and writers themselves scorched and silenced. Artistic expression thus became corrupted and untrustworthy. Furthermore, it was also experienced as inadequate in the wake of the incomprehensible cruelty and suffering of the Holocaust. This immobilization was memorably expressed in the famous quote from Theodor Adorno (1951, p.34), “After Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric.” One of the earliest and most forthright voices opposing such silence was the Jewish poet Paul Celan. Once Kiefer, who has said he would have loved to have been a poet himself, discovered Celan’s poetry he set out on a course of moving into, mediating upon, and interweaving his images with those of Celan, a course he remains dedicated to still today.

Paul Celan was a Hungarian Jew, born in 1920. Both of his parents were killed in concentration camps; he himself escaped deportation but was sent into forced labor, shoveling stones and digging roads. (Felstiner, 1995, p. xv ff.) His

poetry is a dense integration of personal reality and themes of the Holocaust as well as the mythological, literary, and historical realities of both the Jewish and German cultures. One experiences Celan's poems at an instinctual level as acts of mourning which strain to recover meaning and beauty in the language that was so cruelly employed by the Nazis. In any number of Kiefer's works we can almost literally hear Celan's most famous poem, Deathfugue: "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown/We drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night/ . . . when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete/Your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes . . ." (Felstiner, 2001, p.51) In this poem, Celan palpably captures the agonizing intensity and multi-leveled meaning of the historical tragedy of the Germans and the Jews in the two multiply repeated lines: "Your golden hair Margarete/Your ashen hair Shulamith."

The excruciating suffering and the irrefutable presence of evil in these words must have made them virtually impossible to utter. Yet, Celan dared - and so does Kiefer, as is stunningly apparent in his painting *Margarete*



**Figure 6** *Margarete* (1981)

image of roughly twenty stalks of varying heights, standing upright, woven out of

straw. Each is topped with a bright conical shape that so resembles a flame that one quickly sees the straw stalks alluding to candles. We see these stalks formed of dry, golden straw standing in a field - or rather standing amongst blackened straw wound around and climbing up the base of the golden stalks. Is it blackened straw, or is it the ashen hair of Shulamith? We experience the inseparable nature of these images. "Dark milk we drink you at daybreak" . . . The golden stalks, dry and brittle, do hold at their tips, golden flames. The startling intensity of these fires threatens to ignite and destroy the dry straw but yet burns through with an unearthly beauty. "Margarethe" is written across the image, actually woven in and out of the stalks. Kiefer thus compellingly captures how the golden haired maiden places us face-to-face with the archetypal forces that inform the soul of the Germans.

The figure of Margarete is rooted in the romantic traditions of the Meistersingers and their poetic ballads to the unattainable golden haired maidens in the court as well as to Goethe's great piece of literature, *Faust* - and its rich and complicated portrait of the German psyche. As such, this image of her golden hair, inextricably interlocked with the ashen hair of Shulamith, requires us to confront the tension between - and inseparable nature of - these cultural and psychological realities.

In this, as in any number of his previous images, Kiefer uses materials such as ash, straw, sand, dirt, plants, and metals along with paint. The straw embedded in many of Kiefer's paintings makes reference not only to Margarete but also to the old German legend of Rumpelstiltskin who spun straw into gold. In this image, raw material is transformed into something valuable and we are

reminded again of Kiefer's persistent implication that the opposites lie within one another.

When Kiefer turned from Margarete to a reckoning with Shulamith, an



**Figure 7 Shulamith (1983)**

astonishing image emerged - *Shulamith*, 1983. In this very large painting, it's as if we stand at the entrance of an enormous, terrifying but fascinating - or fascinatingly terrifying - room. It

is architecturally like a tomb; again, it speaks of a massive Nazi construction, yet it is more like an underground cave, crypt, or basilica. It clearly feels like a chamber of very dark horror, at the same time that it is somehow a sacred space. Eventually the inescapable sense arrives of its being an entrance to the ovens used for cremations. We see the flames at the far end of the hall and we know we are faced with extermination. Yet the flames also appear to be a Menorah as an altar piece. Revealing what is underground, Kiefer wrestles with unearthing the still unconscious, unacknowledged secrets of the Shoah lodged in the hearts of the German people.

Shulamith, a magnificent woman of black and comely beauty, appears in the sacred Biblical text “Song of Songs” in the Old Testament, a poem that rests deeply in the heart of the Jewish soul. We hear the words “Your ashen hair Shulamith” and we feel the rich, black hair of Shulamith and her gift of beauty to Jewish women while we also feel the shudder of its transformation into ash in the engulfing flames of the Holocaust ovens. *Shulamith*, like *Margarete*, brings forth the living reality of one pole of the German-Jewish dynamic; in this case, we face the archetypal forces that inform the soul of the Jews.

Returning to the image, it is important to notice how the blackened, ash covered wall and ceiling stones are interlaced with a strangely numinous gold, close up one can see that it is, in places, actually straw. Here, the golden hair of Margarete is interwoven into the reality of Shulamith. Yet the polished floor is an unforgiving, threatening, shining black; it suggests that the bottom ground of this reality is thoroughly, irrefutably evil. Flames also sit upon each column, yet this structure does not feel vulnerable to change. Perhaps it is Kiefer’s intent to carve this reality into stone - that it may never be forgotten.

But the flames are there - as is Margrete’s golden hair - and it is this capacity to portray the *lumen naturem*, the light within nature, the sparks of consciousness buried deep in apparently unforgiving darkness that is Kiefer’s remarkable strength. It is also his strength, and perhaps his fate, to survive these investigations into the darkness of psyche. In tragic contrast, Paul Celan, as well as a lover of his, Ingeborg Bachman, another German poet to whose writings Kiefer often refers, both committed suicide as the years took their toll.

The archetype of creation-destruction is, as archetypal potentiality, an undifferentiated and amoral force. Embodied in humankind, this archetype, like others, is met by an emerging form of ego consciousness. Consciousness brings with it the process of differentiating, which makes it possible that the poles of the archetype emerge as separable forces. It is then possible for one pole of the archetype to overwhelm, rule, or tyrannize the nascent or weak ego, while the other pole is, typically, projected and attacked. It is this state of polarized opposites that Jung saw diagnostically as the critical dilemma, and prospectively, as the essential potentiality for individuation and wholeness. He argued that the development of the capacity to hold the tension between the opposites led to the constellation of the transcendent function and the emergence of the third, of a newly birthed position. This, we imagine, is as true for a nation as for an individual. When we note that Kiefer portrays the archetypal force of destruction without splitting off the force of creation, we are suggesting that in his careful examination of the darkness he is consistently holding the tension between destruction and creation. It is this radical synthesis that endows his work with a palpable numinosity.

In 1982, Kiefer completed a work called *Nuremberg*. Set atop tortured fields after some apocalyptic battle, the dance of death in the painting *Nuremberg* is immediate and visceral. Familiar now are the ravaged wintry fields that drift off into a dark horizon. Yet the shimmering presence of straw across this surface, golden straw intermingled with blackened burnt straw imbues this work with unsettling delicacy and beauty. This pattern of intertwined straw dances to the point of chaos. The archetype of creation-





**Figure 8 Nuremberg (1982)**

destruction has rhythmically expressed itself with historical force in the city of Nuremberg itself. An important European center of trade in the Middle Ages, it also had a murderous history of pogroms against the Jews.

After a long period of slaughter, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Nuremberg was the city where the flowering of the Renaissance in Germany occurred. From 1927-1938 the Nazi Party chose this city to be the site of huge Nazi Party conventions—the Nuremberg rallies. The primary aspect of the Nuremberg Rallies was to strengthen the personality cult of Adolf Hitler, portraying Hitler as Germany's saviour, chosen by providence. Once again Nuremberg became a center of sanctioned anti-Semitism. And finally, Nuremberg is the city where the War Tribunal that called the Nazi officers into account, took place.

In this painting, we see the themes of destruction and death once again presented in multi-layered cultural and historical terms. From an analytic perspective, this is a portrait of the archetypal fields of destruction and death. Thinking symbolically, we can see these as images of the archetypal landscape that appears within a psyche as the harrowing battleground of the alpha narcissist. As noted above, alpha narcissism is informed by the archetype of creation-destruction and manifests itself through aggressive dominance. Ever

determined to dominate and win, interested only in self-gain, the alpha narcissist is coldly able to swindle, connive, and overpower whoever/whatever is in his way, without concern for the individual - without concern for another. From this perspective, it appears that Kiefer is making a detailed study of alpha narcissism with its underlying dynamics of psychopathy. Directly facing and moving into, the war torn reality of the post-war German psyche, Kiefer paints image after image of the presence of evil enacted in our lives.

In the late 1980's, Kiefer bought a huge, abandoned brickwork factory and began to accumulate the abundant, large scaled materials of his work: huge plants, snakeskins, metals, photographic equipment and papers. He happened to discover that the old lead roof of the Cologne Cathedral was being replaced and he took it upon himself to buy and store it. Many of his subsequent works contain this lead, a material that is at once consecrated yet also laden with dogma. "Kiefer envisions a leaden age rather than a golden one; as he has remarked, 'Looking for light is a tyranny we can't afford now.'" (Auping, 2005, p. 50). In the brick factory, his work that had already assumed an enormous scale, now found room and materials with which to deepen and expand.

Images of tracks and ladders can be found interwoven throughout Kiefer's iconography. They speak to us of movement but generally the direction, or goal, of this movement is illusive, or even paradoxical. We experience the tracks as leading back and forth, to - or from - the horizon and thus related to infinity, or to death? While they clearly, and hauntingly, hearken back to the train tracks carrying millions of suffering human beings into the concentration camps, they also carry the archetypal potentiality of a pathway, a journey, a transformation.

When Kiefer represents these tracks vertically, they appear as ladders. Yet the ladders, as the tracks, are paradoxical, neither resting on the earth nor reaching into heaven, leading neither up nor down. Within this image is the alchemical concept of the coincidence of all opposites: that rise and fall, ascent and descent, God and void, male and female are all one and the same. (Roob, 1997, p. 274 & 282). Such a ladder appears in a work called *Seraphim* (1983). Contrary to our conventional images of Seraphim, the highest order of angels, these angels are strange beings indeed. They appear as black, erratic, and dismembered wings, hovering on either side of a dark ladder. A serpent, a fallen angel, is coiled at its base. The Seraphim were thought to offer spiritual salvation through fire and



**Figure 9 *Seraphim* (1983)**

burnt offerings. The actual burning of the materials used in creating this painting suggests a more specific reading: the Latin word used to describe a sacrificial offering consumed by flames is “holocaust.”

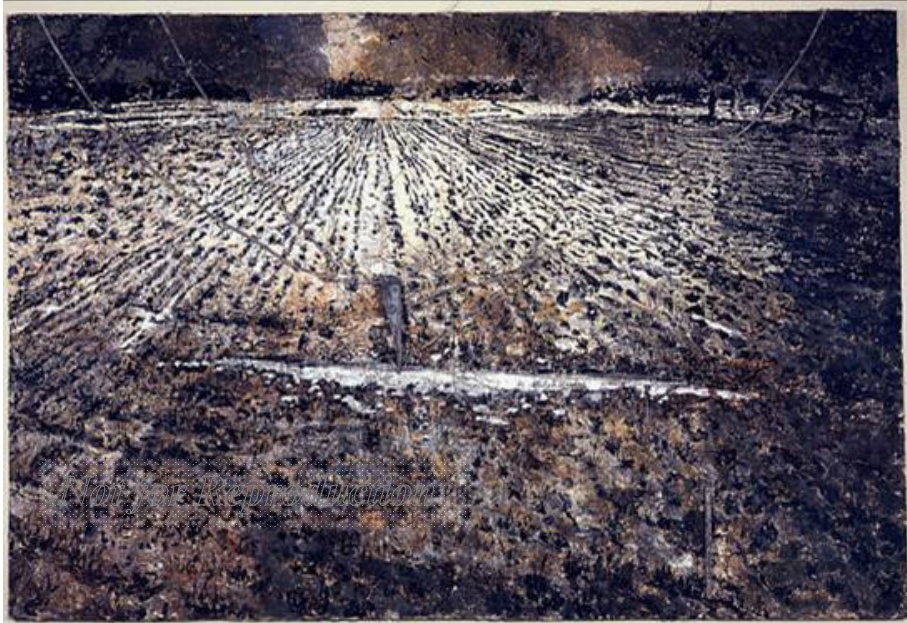
From a series once again dedicated to Paul Celan, in the painting *The Goddesses of Destiny/ Die Nornen*, (2005) we see Kiefer reflecting upon the themes of the devastation of war and the relentless murdering of the Jews in an



**Figure 10** *The Goddesses of Destiny/ Die Nornen, (2005)*

image about the mythology alive within the ravaged landscape. As we look at - and wander into - this image, we see the scattered and broken tree trunks, stuck in the frozen earth, not only as dismembered bodies but also, the more

and more we look, as a nascent form of the early runic alphabet. Thus, even without the title and the ancient Nordic words, we can see that Kiefer is alluding to Norse mythology and the long and embattled stories within this mythology that lie within, and inform, the German soul. This is one of many images that Kiefer painted over the years about the stories within this mythology. Lopez-Pedraza (1996) suggests that a Wotanic unconscious seems to be at the core of German fate; he notes that this mythology is essentially a mythology of warriors, both gods and heroes, with a crucial emphasis on heroic death. He concludes that this psychic configuration, related to heroic death, can be contrasted to a tragic emotional reflection of life, as is found in Greek mythology. Kiefer directly addresses this death-possessed unconscious through his art.



**Figure 11** *The Milky Way (1987)*

In *The Milky Way* (1987) we once again see the burnt decimated fields of post war Europe. Yet, in this instance a

white slash of paint emerges in the foreground surrounded by a golden light pierced by the tip of a three-dimensional lead funnel. This huge funnel appears to be sending and receiving light, to be pouring energy from heaven into earth and/or from earth, into heaven. One gets the impression that there is a constant process of circulation between heaven and earth; that what is below is also above. The lead funnel thus appears to function as an alchemist's tool, attempting to transform the burnt landscape into a renewed field, introducing a transformative step into the eternal cycle of creation and destruction. In 1984, in a work titled *Athanor*, Kiefer presented a hauntingly dark and foreboding image that once again conjured up the felt sense of the concentration camp ovens. Alchemically, athanor refers to a self-feeding furnace used by alchemists in their effort to transform common substances into nobler material, such as base metals into gold. Kiefer's explicit use of alchemical images and metaphors continues to

appear in his work. In the fall of 2007, Kiefer mounted a permanent installation in the Louvre, of a piece again titled *Athanor*.

It is significant that Kiefer chooses a *lead* funnel. Lead is the alchemist's metal, and Kiefer uses this metal intentionally. It not only grounds his work but also imbues it with the possibility of transformation. It holds a shimmer yet portends a darkness. It is also the metal of Saturn. It is poisonous



**Figure 12** *Book with Wings (1994)*

to work with which makes its use in painting enigmatic and original. Noting that among the Hebrews of antiquity lead symbolized the preservation of records, it is not surprising to find that Kiefer creates many remarkable books out of lead. *Book with Wings* (1994) is a sculpture that is literally a huge lead book on a pedestal with feathered wings of an enormous wingspan. Here we feel how the weight of history is balancing a movement towards transcendence; despite its aerial desires, this leaden book is distinctly bound to the earth. As noted above, Kiefer speaks of our times as, necessarily, a leaden age.



**Figure 13** *The Secret Life of Plants (2001)*

In 2001, Kiefer created a monumental sculpture that integrates many of his previous themes. *The Secret Life of Plants* is a lead book standing on end with pages so huge that you can step between them. The separated pages reveal different maps of

heaven filled with numbered stars and dusted with faint, flesh colored poppies. This sculpture stands as if Kiefer is presenting a globe - as if this is a map, simultaneously, of our historical and mythological and inner worlds. This particular work highlights Kiefer's referencing the theory of the alchemist Robert Fludd that for every star in the sky there is a corresponding plant on earth. And recalling the associative link between the numbers of the stars and the numbers engraved on the arms of internees in concentration camps, we know that we are asked to re-member the victims of the Holocaust as well as sense the falling of the stars. Intermingled with the stars are occasional faint poppies. Introduced here, but appearing with increasing frequency in works since this one, poppies are a complex symbol. While they do represent new growth, they also are symbolic of oblivion and unconsciousness. Appearing in a number of Kiefer's recent images of furrowed but rough fields, these surprising flowers capture a bi-valent

experience of potential rebirth colored by the reminder of illusion and of a poignant, lethal loss of memory that covers up the agonies of the war torn ravaged fields below.

Kiefer's multi-leveled use of books appears with phenomenal impact in

several installations that he has presented over the years titled *Shevirat Ha-kelim* or *The Shattering of the Vessels*. The photographs shown here were taken of the version of this piece in the exhibition, Monumenta, in Paris, in June 2007. A



**Figure 14** *Shevirat Ha-kelim or The Shattering of the Vessels (2007)*

previous version is in the permanent collection of the St. Louis Art Museum. As you can see, from looking at the figure in the doorway to the left, this sculpture stands over 20 feet high. Its title is the name of the Kabaalistic story of creation. This installation clearly speaks of this story while it also memorializes Krystallnacht -- the night of terror when the Nazis went into the Jewish neighborhoods throughout Germany shattering the windows of synagogues, businesses and homes. It is - in its essence - far beyond words; it requires a moment of silence, silence within which we can mourn - mourn as we listen to - or hear the echoes of - the large sheets of glass inserted between the lead books, falling and shattering.





**Figure 15** *Detail of Figure 14*

Many people have challenged Kiefer's continuing interest in the Holocaust, wondering if it can be understood as guilt for his country's persecution of the Jews. Certainly he is of the generation of Germans who have been asked to wrestle with the immense complications of this personal and national guilt. Yet Kiefer contends that his circumambulation of these themes is a matter of "reassembling." He explains, "I cannot imagine German culture without Judaism. Everything that makes German philosophy and poetry interesting to the world is a combination of Germany and Judaism. One thing is that Germans committed the immense crime of killing Jews. The other is that they amputated themselves. They took half of German culture and killed it." (Auping, 2005, p. 45)



**Figure 16** *The Ash Flower* (1984)

In an enormous painting, *The Ash Flower*, (1984), which stretches 25' long and 12' high, Kiefer reduces a large Nazi structure to faint verticals and grid lines that converge in the lower half of the canvas. He then hung, down the middle of this painting, a dried sunflower on a very long stalk; inverted, its roots are at the top of the painting in the air, while its dried bloom hangs in front of painfully dried cracked earth. "The eroded, blistered surface of the piece is a mishmash of earthen stuff, the material seems to be separating from the canvas and about to fall onto the floor." (Cudlin, 2006) As a result of the variety of materials that Kiefer uses in his works, much of the work is very fragile. It is actually eroding before our eyes, not just representing transience, but embodying it. The empire that Hitler wanted to last 1000 years fades before our eyes. One historical age gives way to another.

In Norse mythology, the fabric of the universe was maintained by a gigantic ash tree which remained always green; it was from this tree that would

emerge the ancestors of a new race of people, after the death of the old gods. We might see this painting as based in this mythology, yet here is an ashen sun flower, upside down and no longer green. Kiefer insists that we face that the force of destruction has ruthlessly rampaged through this land, killing off even our imagined sources of new life. This image seems to bring into question any



**Figure 17** *Falling Stars* (1995)

sense of an expected, predictable future. Is there a future after the holocaust? After the apocalypse? Yet, when we reflect upon the fact that this great sun flower is hung upside down, we catch the reference to the alchemical and Kabbalistic images of the roots of the tree of life being in heaven. (Jung, 1945, P.410 ff.) This brings into view the paradoxical possibility that this palpable destruction may be a phase of transformation. From this perspective,

the ashen flower is another image of the axis mundi; intrapsychically we can imagine it as the ego-Self axis.

In 1993, Kiefer moved from Germany to southern France, setting up his home and studios in a large, secluded abandoned silk-worm factory near Barjac. Kiefer's work in Barjac continues to revolve around the themes and materials described above, although we notice a progressive emphasis upon both stars and

plants. In 1995, he created an astonishing painting titled *Falling Stars*. In this life size painting, we see the artist lying on a barren earth looking towards the stars. There is a single, clear line from his face to one star in the heavens. It's as if his focus is on this star, and its focus is on him. This line creates yet another version of an axis mundi between consciousness and the archetypal realms, between earth and heaven introducing once again what, in Jungian terms, we refer to as the ego-Self axis. This image of a man is apparently Kiefer himself, lying on the ground under the vast expanse of the heavens, forging a relationship between himself and the stars.

We are reminded of a statement made by the alchemist, Dorn, as quoted by Jung, “Our vessel must be such that in it matter can be influenced by the heavenly bodies. For the invisible celestial bodies and the impressions of the stars are necessary to the work.” (Jung, 1968, P. 338n) Our consciousness, as vessel, must be sufficiently strong and flexible to relate to the archetypal realms since they are the wellsprings of soul and spirit. Indeed, the numinous, profound impact of “the stars” is essential, while it is also essential that we are not possessed or overwhelmed by it. Thus we find Kiefer lying supine, quite exposed, but steadily and sturdily, engaging this energy directly. John Beebe has observed that “because it reconfigures the earthly representatives of the heavenly bodies, alchemy is a way of releasing ourselves from Heimarmené, the compulsion of the stars . . . consciousness (is) what alchemy is attempting to distill, the only alternative to fate (c.f. Jung's comment: that which someone cannot make conscious happens to him as fate).”

This embodied, strong and flexible consciousness, represented by the

figure lying on the ground, rests upon a heritage of suffering. The land is dried and ravaged, clearly laden with the history of WWII, and of all wars, of the human capacity to destroy - and to survive. This consciousness is well informed about archetypal forces at work on earth and in heaven. The stars themselves are paradoxically both alight in the sky and, blackened, burnt, and falling. We see numerous dead stars collected on the man's body. The human vessel lies, awake, in the midst of it all, capable of holding the tension between creation and destruction, life and death.

The evocative sun flower reappeared in 1996 in a painting titled, *Sol Invictus*, which means “unconquered sun.” This title calls up the long but fading reign of the Roman emperors. By choosing to depict an extraordinarily tall sunflower at its moment of decline, scattering its now dry though still potentially fertile seeds, Kiefer captures the assumed superiority of tyrannical rule, now humbled, indeed conquered, by the passing of time. This would suggest that empires follow the same natural rhythms as plant life, gathering in height, only to face an inevitable decline and death. Life and death, creation and destruction are ultimately



**Figure 18** *Sol Invictus*  
(1996)

inseparable. This begins a number of images in which Kiefer emphasizes a sense

of time as cyclic, in contrast to linear and conclusive.

Kiefer's work courageously addresses German history and the German psyche and, through these elements, universal issues. *Sol Invictus* encourages us to address our own cultural history and our cultural character. As we noted earlier, America is typically seen as narcissistic. In the global political challenges of these past years, our cultural narcissism is being mightily challenged. Our exhibitionism, grandiosity, and charisma as well as our righteous identification with the hero and our contempt for others may well be in a state of collapse.



**Figure 19** *The 6<sup>th</sup> Trumpet (1996)*

Cyclic time, dramatically punctuated by moments of horrifying destruction are evident in Kiefer's painting titled *The 6<sup>th</sup> Trumpet* (1996) referencing the 6<sup>th</sup> image of the Apocalypse in

which a third of mankind is killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur. In Kiefer's image, down upon a withered decimated land, the vast sky is raining what appear to be burned sun flower seeds, as in *Sol Invictus*. But are these ash itself? Or are they blackened stars? By naming two other very similar

images, “*This Dark Brightness Which Falls From the Stars*” Kiefer made explicit connections between the blackened seeds of the sun flower and the stars that appeared in *Falling Stars*. In this instance this moment is associated with the apocalypse.

Many felt the events of 9-11 to be apocalyptic in scope, the beginning of the end for believing that we are unbeatable and are "safe." Imagery of the apocalypse abounds in our post 9-11 American psyche. War, vengeance, endless rounds of retribution, martyrdom, slaughter and fears of end times thrive. President Bush crafted foreign policy inspired by thoughts of the triumph of good over the forces of evil, American heroes against the Islamist evildoers.

It is important to note that in a culture where apocalyptic imagery is abundant, apocalyptic events are humanized by being understood, not by being left unconscious, fueled by archetypal furies and fears. Psychologically, in the personal and collective psyche, apocalyptic images precede the momentous event of the coming of the Self into conscious realization. As our cultural narcissism is being challenged and perhaps defeated, images of the Apocalypse may be representing the violent shattering of our world as it has been. We feel that our country experienced a severe narcissistic wounding that we have been reeling from ever since. These times may be the beginning of the end of our behaving as an empire. And yet this defeat may offer us an opportunity culturally to access the gifts that lie beneath any narcissistic defense.

With this dedication, Kiefer also began to work with the language and images of ancient Jewish mysticism. Lauterwein (2007) carefully explores how Kiefer accepted Celan’s invitation to confront memory, of the Holocaust but also

of Jewish memory as a whole, and to mourn. Numerous works titled “Sefer Hechaloth” take us into landscapes referring to the Seven Heavenly Palaces and to Merkaba, the chariot that takes the mystic on the journey through these palaces to union with the divine. However, in Kiefer’s characteristic way, these images are intriguingly paradoxical. In one of these paintings, we find sculpted



**Figure 20** *Sefer Hechaloth (2002)*

steps attached to and protruding from a canvas; on each step is a burned book. In other images, the steps are haphazardly numbered, at times moving upward, at times down. Kiefer has commented that, “In the Sefer Hechaloth, the ancient book that came before the kabala, there is no worry of directions. It describes stages, metaphors,

and symbols that float everywhere. Up and down were the same direction...For me, this also relates to time. Past, present and future are essentially the same direction. It is about finding symbols that move in all directions.” (Auping, 2005, p.165) And further, Kiefer states that “Heaven is an idea, a piece of ancient internal knowledge. It is not a physical construction. ... the palaces of heaven are still a mystery and I am making my own investigation. Obviously, this is not just



about traveling through palaces, but traveling through yourself in order to know yourself.” (Auping, 2005, p. 176.)

He has also represented the palaces as tall, freestanding towers. Challenging both symbolic and aesthetic taboos, these enormous, looming towers tend to be constructed of concrete and rebar and appear in various states of ruin.

Images of these daunting and gawky structures occasionally appear in one of his paintings. In *Ex Voto*, (2004), Kiefer presents two of these towers, drawn sketchily, with a small airplane descending between them. While these towers are clearly constructed like the many towers Kiefer had built and installed in various places over the previous years, in this image, with the plane, they appear shockingly to be the Twin Towers just before the



**Figure 21** *Ex Voto* (2004)

moment of impact. Upon reflection, we appreciate Kiefer’s ever-present capacity to forge interconnections between war, history, and the sacred.

Psychologically, the inflation, superiority, and impenetrability embodied in the towers convincingly represent the dynamics of defensive narcissism. Jungian analyst M.-L. von Franz in her classic work on narcissism, uses the metaphor of an airplane flying straight up into the sky. (von Franz, 1970) She

suggests that the narcissistically defended person is not really available for analysis or relatedness until he runs out of gas and begins to fall earthwards. This particular image thus ties Kiefer's historical and archetypal explorations directly into our reflections regarding American narcissism.

Narcissism, personal and cultural, is generally considered to be a character "disorder." Yet it deserves to be recognized as an essential and invaluable developmental stage. There are gifts that can emerge when hardened narcissistic defenses are worked through and supported by a strong and flexible ego. The gifts inherent in narcissism arrive through a careful, conscious engagement with the dark, through the direct experience of suffering and a steady dialogue with the stars, with the archetypal realms. Culturally, for example, instead of our country perceiving itself as invincible and invulnerable, imagine how it would be if we could develop the capacity to experience our fragility in the face of destruction, to develop a capacity to experience a sense of the tragedy of life, all the while holding on to the hope/reality of possibility and beauty. As rigid narcissistic defenses are worked through, they become more flexible and a dialogue along the ego-Self axis becomes possible. Kohut observed that archaic narcissism is transformed into empathy, humor, creativity, a sense of transience, and wisdom. Then the narcissistic goal is no longer about perfection, but relatedness, becoming one among others. We then can accept that we are not invulnerable, but that our lives are transient and time-limited. (Kohut, 1966; Lachman, 2008)

In the summer of 2007, an extensive array of Kiefer's more recent work was installed in the newly renovated Grand Palais in Paris. Within this enormous

exhibition hall, Kiefer installed several renditions of his towers along with numerous “galleries” constructed to display various other pieces. Throughout



**Figure 22 View of concrete bunkers and wall of paintings (2007)**

this show, titled *Monumenta* 2007, Kiefer continued to further develop and elaborate the many themes discussed above.

Displayed in this context, it was virtually impossible not to respond to Kiefer’s invitation to the viewer that she participate in his work by truly experiencing and thus finishing it; each gallery asked one to stay, to linger, to read, to cry, to think, to be impacted. One of these galleries takes us deeply into an

experience of the gifts of narcissism. As you enter the room, you walk between the wall on your left which is mounted floor to ceiling, side to side, with 44 large framed paintings, while on your right, filling up the majority of the floor space in this gallery are two large concrete bunkers, in partial ruin, boasting flimsy rusted iron make-shift doors and multiple pieces of broken rebar. The paintings are various images of tall dried exquisite ferns mounted upon multiple grounds, painted, or more accurately, “built” from earth, clay, paint, rock, “smoke,” straw

and ash. As you study these ferns, you find them interspersed with tracks or ladders, with filaments of both golden and ashen hair, and with numerous words inviting one into the alchemist's laboratory as well as into the midnight rituals of Johannisnacht. As you explore and absorb these images, you stand and walk between them and the massive bunkers behind you. In words at



**Figure 23** *One of the paintings in Figure 22*

the doorway you're informed about Kiefer's intense interest in ferns; he has said, "The first trees were ferns. They are primal. Charcoal and oil are made out of ferns that existed at the beginning of life. There are many stories and folktales about plants having memories. If this is true, ferns could tell us a great deal about our beginnings. Like forests, ferns may contain secret knowledge. But they are complex in relation to Christian symbols of light. They grow in the shade. On the evening of Johannisnacht, the devil goes out into the fields and spreads fern seeds. This creates a certain chaos. Ferns remind us that we also need the

darkness.” (Kiefer in Auping, 2005, p.90) You are also told that the title of the room is “Invisibility and Invincibility”; it is dedicated to Paul Celan; and if you would like, you can listen to a recording, made before his death, of Celan reading the “Deathfugue.”

The contrast between the paintings and the bunkers becomes more and more powerful as one stands between the two. The wall is graced with the gentle unfurling of the ferns, rich with fertile spores, entrancingly beautiful and apparently delicate but actually remarkably sturdy. These images radiate a robust sense of abundant, glorious life that thrives in the very midst of suffering and destruction. Meanwhile, the bunkers exist as all too gripping a reminder of the rigid, militaristic defenses that emerge when the archetype of destruction thrusts us into violent warfare that leaves behind rusted iron, broken rebar, and untold human agony and death. The bunkers in essence serve the archetype of destruction. The ferns, meanwhile, speak of the eternal cycle of creation-destruction, the glorious appearance of new life and the sorrowful arrival of death. As such, these images are an embodiment of the gifts of narcissism; they emerge as an inspiring synthesis of the opposites. Standing in the middle of this room, listening on the audio-guide to Celan recite the Deathfugue, one is deeply moved by Kiefer’s remarkable courage and capacity to speak of spiraling cycles of creation-destruction and the presence of the divine within the reality of the darkest reaches of human history.

Kiefer’s capacity to suffer life’s agonies without splitting life from death, creation from destruction is an invaluable guide. In individuals as well as with cultures, it is through our wounds that we can find healing, not in spite of them.

In human terms, accepting the limits of one's narcissism and suffering life's agonies can bear fruit. The gifts of narcissism worked through are many. The dynamics present in this stage of development can lead us not only towards a healthy capacity for experiencing and asserting our presence in the world but also towards a deep acceptance of suffering and transience. Out of this acceptance can emerge a quiet sense of being at one with one's world. We see this transformative process represented time and time again in Kiefer's work.

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