The Study of Classical Hebrew Poetry:

Methodological Issues – epistemological and empirical

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Being aware of the difficulties one confronts in identifying POETRY, epistemologicallywise and terminologicallywise, the exeget can engage with more demanding issues such as the method applied to the texts. There are two prime presuppositions one should admit in such a study. First, POETRY is the reflection of the subjective/aesthetic values a given community shares, tending to break allegiance to narrative norms. Second, POETRY may be diachronically adjustable, the subjective/aesthetic values being incorporated more or less originally by each generation, depending on the conservativeness of the traditional values in relation to other cultures and sets of values.

When biblical POETRY is concerned, different methodologies were involved in its long and fruitful history of criticism. They vary on epistemological, empirical and procedural grounds. This paper covers the first two of them, allowing ourselves more room for the discussion of the last one in future papers.

The epistemological limitations

According to Riffaterre's dichotomy between mimesis and semiosis as the two centres of signification in a poem, analytical theories of POETRY might be *mimetic*

theories, insisting on the relation of the poetic text to biographical, historical, social and economic realities outside the text, and *semiotic theories*, foregrounding the text and its signifying structures. Since the former refers to the representation of reality, mimetic theories try to identify the function of a specific text in its setting-in-life. The latter comprises of the organisation of elements within the text into signifying systems. Thus, semiotic theories prefer to approach a poem in its literary context, discerning its *verbatim* significance for the original reader so that a transfer of meaning could take place toward the modern reader (cf. Riffaterre 1978).

This possibility was dramatically challenged by post-structuralism and deconstruction, which saw 'the text' as no more than an illusion; what really exists is the personal perception of the text, or its 'reading'. Consequently, from a writer–text–reader parametres paradigm we can speak of three approaches: writer criticism (with reference to the *Sitz im Leben* from which might have originated the text), text criticism, and reader-response criticism. This situation proves the complexity of reading ancient texts as a process, which entangles the source author/context/reader and the target reader/context.[1] Although we deal more or less with its impact on the reading of ancient texts and we encounter its effects on the history of interpretation, we will ignore discussing the method itself. In order to avoid its effects as much as possible, we need to objectivize our method accordingly.

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[1] A three-pointed hermeneutic paradigm is suggested also by Barton. Trying to organize different types of biblical criticism, Barton found M.H. Abrams's critical model on Romanticism very inspiring. The four basic coordinates of any critical theory, according to Abrams, were WORK, ARTIST, AUDIENCE AND UNIVERSE. On Barton's diagram they relate to TEXT, AUTHOR, READER, HISTORICAL EVENTS/THEOLOGICAL IDEAS. As a result the study of the Bible was proposed to have been approached in three ways: referential (the study of entities refered to), intentional (study of the writer's intention), and poetic/aesthetic (study of myths and images of the text as it is). See (Barton 1984).

A good example of mimetic theory could be offered by form criticism (*Formgeschichte*), lately complemented by genre-criticism (*Gattungsgeschichte*).[2] Form critics and genre critics are eager to reconstruct the original setting of the songs; in many cases, a particular liturgical background being held responsible for launching them for subsequent canonization, but a secular *Sitz im Leben* is also sometimes envisaged. In order to discern the original context, the content and the form (structure) of the respective work of literature is observed, but content prevails over its form. As far as type-critics are concerned the cultic function of a poem is pre-eminent. So far neither Eissfeldt, nor Mowinckel, nor any other to our knowledge, have proposed a coherent enough theory, which relates coherently form and content to Hebrew poetic categories.[3]

Whereas his interpretation of Hebrew poetic categories is rather uncertain, Mowinckel (1962, 207–17) proposes literary categories with a specific content subscribed. As his paradigm includes multiple parametres (subject, form, content, cult function), poetic genres are more elaborate and composite as seen in various pss. According to his genetic theory it is the particular cultic function which stimulated a specific content, but this could have been incorporated only by a particular form due to the strings of traditional and conventional style. Thus, cultic function is held as the pre-eminent factor for his taxonomy, although form seems to have a more important role (Mowinckel 1962, 5-12, cf. pp. 23-41). The method is based on a preliminary careful

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[2] Its promoter is considered to be Herman Gunkel in his commentary *Die Psalmen*. However, his ideas were previously disseminated (Mowinckel 1962, 24 n.2). For a distinction between the two see sections II.1., II.2 in Mowinckel 1962, 23–35.

[3] Although Eissfeldt considers cognate literatures he relies too much on content (Eissfeldt 1965). Westermann (1965), who promotes only SUBJECT and CONTENT as classificatory parametres, provides a simpler categorization: lament of the individual, lament of the people, declarative praise of the individual, declarative praise of the people, descriptive praise (the individual and people input are mixed). Gerstenberger (1988, 9-21) recalls Gunkel's multistrata classification and divides the poetic works into dirges (laments), complaints, thanksgiving, songs of praise (hymns), royal psalms and wisdom psalms. However, he is aware of the limit his theory entangles because some of the intrinsic parts of the genres suggested may be rearranged or even be missing (1988, 10).

observation of the content (form, style, thoughts, and moods), which represents the link between cultic function and its respective traditional form. Since the cultic function is not certain, and the form is to be reconstructed, content is all the researcher has. Nevertheless, Mowinckel admitted conclusively the referee role form plays over content, reflecting the conservative and compulsory role played by a traditional society over the flexible and capricious personal style of the authors.

The semiotic theories comprise all kinds of more or less new approaches, discussing poems in relation to their textual context or as texts by themselves. Biblical structuralists try to prove that Hebrew Poetry (henceforth, HPy) was built upon specific devices, which determined the creativity of their respective authors. In most cases, a simple process of emulation took place, originality being defined in terms of more or less conformity to the paradigmatic *song*. Their method is blended with rhetorical criticism, inspired either by Graeco-Roman rhetoric or by the rhetoric of cognate languages (mainly Canaanite, but also Assyrian, Egyptian, Hittite). Either way, the analytical appearance of the descriptive approaches is balanced by comparative studies. When it implies Graeco-Roman and non-cognate studies, a comparative method on the grand scale is used, but when it implies cognate studies, the comparative method is applied on a much narrow scale.

Besides, in order to focus on applying our method with objectivity, as far as one possibly can achieve, we are constricted to limit also our object of research in such a manner that a workable methodology might be applicable, thorough investigation can be pursued and credible conclusions are reached. Epistemological issues are of great significance here, because the more representative our object is for the phenomena we are investigating, the more valuable the conclusions will be. Thus, by what criteria can

the texts be selected on which we will apply our methodology? Basically, there are two main choices.

We might consider opting for a traditional perspective, which applies the layout criterion. This means applying our method on those texts framed in the manuscripts (henceforth, MSS) with a different layout from that of the majority of texts. In addition to the 'poetic books' of Psalms, Proverbs and Job, there are a few more poetic fragments embedded in the Torah and the Former Prophets. Traditionally, they are the following: Exodus 15:1-19 (known as *The Song of Moses and children of Israel*, or *The Song of the Sea*), Deuteronomy 32 (*Ha'azinu*, or *The Song of Moses*), Judges 5 (*The Song of Deborah*), and 2 Samuel 22 (*The Song of David*).[4]

Qumrân MSS are not very helpful in providing us with enough information on this matter, but the fact is that the Masoretes found them of particular value to promote their preservation in a separate category, providing with a particular class of accents for them. The meaning of such a treatment is still obscure, but one can notice that *Psalms*, *Proverbs* and *Job* are treated differently than the rest of the biblical books. Consequent pss came to be separated one from another by blank spaces, and Psalm 119 came to be divided into its corresponding acrostic strophes.[5]

This type of selection exhibits few weaknesses. First, we cannot be certain what connection the original scribes assumed between these texts and a specific layout. A closer look to the MSS and the printed versions will show a much more varied

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[4] Other texts fit a similar description, but are not included here (e.g. Gen 49, Deut 33, 1 Sam 2.1-10; 2 Sam 1.19-27). Those quoted above were treated in a specific manner, by displaying them in two columns coextensive, in most cases, with their respective hemistichs.

[5] Vellum of the Bible (14th cent.—BM Or. 4227) exhibits an interesting way of laying out Ps. 119 which displays its strophes as individual psalms. Therefore, there are 170 psalms instead of 150. Few pss are jointed together into one. This is why instead of the expected 172 pss we find only 170 (Margoliouth 1899, 30). For detailed study of some ancient MSS see my forthcoming article "Classical Hebrew Poetry and Its Technical Rendering in Ancient Manuscripts and Mediaeval Incunabula" (*Transformation* 2005).

calligraphy, surpassed by incredible illuminations, than we could offer here. Interestingly enough, the pattern presented before has varieties, and it is applied even to other texts, which we catalogue plainly as lists. See for example the list of the kings of Canaan defeated by Joshua (Jos 12:9–24) or Haman's sons (Est 9:7–9) (Kugel 1981, 120).

Secondly, if we select these texts and not others, the corpus will be far too extensive in quantitative terms and qualitatively we will have to deal with poems of different contexts, sharing diverse contents and wearing the creative mark of different authors. Besides, why *Canticles* is not accepted as POETRY is not clear enough. It could have been a canonical principle that left *Canticles* outside the 'poetical' books or probably 'poetical' books were catalogued as such for other reasons that, for the moment, escape our grasp.

Another option will be to accept the criterion of antiquity and work on the selection made by other scholars. For example, Albright and his school have chosen a group of psalms on which they applied their method of dating HPy. To the four poetic texts embedded in PROSE texts previously presented, they added a few more: Gen. 49:1–28, Num. 23–24, Deut. 33, 1 Sam. 2:1–10, 2 Sam. 1:19–27, 2 Sa 23:1–7, Ps. 29, 68, 72, 78. Although some objective criteria are applied to prove their poetic character, this selection in particular is supposed to permit the reconstruction of a chronology of HPy. Criteria used refer to style and include repetitive parallelism, paranomasia, word play (proposed by Albright 1944), and the usage of a particular name of the Lord (proposed by Freedman 1980, 77ff).

Avishur (1994) allows another group of Biblical psalms to enter in dialogue with the cognate literature, particularly Ugaritic. His selection is not very different from

Albright's because Ugaritic influences on Hebrew religious literature, on which Avishur based his selection, can be considered either a sign of their antiquity or intended archaisation.[6] He had included alongside Psalm 29, 82, and Habakkuk 3, other poetic texts such as psalms 16, 19, 74, 77, 89, 92, and 110 for the fragments they include resembling ancient Ugaritic hymns. A supplementary common link between Ugaritic and Hebrew poetical texts is the genre. Avishur, continuing Cassuto and Loewenstamm, analyzed a particular literary genre, namely Ugaritic and Hebrew psalms. He could trace down common structural features (namely chiasm, seven- and ten-fold repetition) and common patterns of vocabulary (namely formulaic phrases), although he noticed that Hebrew typology is more developed (Avishur 1994, 35-6).

Obviously, there are good reasons for preferring poetical texts of the same genre, but if content did not define either genre involved or the stylistic devices (henceforth, SDs) used, then such rigorous selectivity is useless. If one can prove such close ties, or even the mere existence of genre, it follows that one has to prefer as research object texts of the same type. As far as Classical HPy is concerned, there is known that poetical line (having parallelism as the main feature) were involved not only for writing hymns but also odes, love songs, prophecy, sapiential texts, and even genealogical lists. It is rather awkward to assume that only religious texts might have been written in poetical lines since the whole Bible is religious one way or another, and there are plenty of poetical texts that are not religious at all (unless a hidden spiritual meaning is perceived, see *Canticles*).

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[6] Intended archaisation is not to be excluded completely but it is more difficult to prove and has to take into consideration many other factors including poetical innovations in the context of traditional POETRY writing.

The empirical limitation

At this level we need to detail the so-called textual limitation of our method, which might be approached as a semantic clarification, as Watson suggested, by contrasting POETRY *recognition* to POETRY *reconstruction*. This procedure seems very important, since reconstruction of the original text was imposed as obligatory in the methodology that profesor Albright and his pupils promoted during the last eight decades. Whilst recognition of a poetic text implies just a reclassification, based on the identification of specific devices that define POETRY *per se*, reconstruction brings into negotiation even the texture which is no longer either authoritative or finite, emendations being recommendable in order to achieve a more fluent and coherent text (Watson 1984, 45).

Albright's method of dating POETRY, for example the oracles of Balaam, makes use of the epigraphic material discovered and reconstructed of North West Semitic grammar and lexicography. Few rules emanate from the field: in older Hebrew poems no *matres lectionis* were written either in medial or final position, vowel-letters in medial or final position were omitted, in North Israelite tradition, following the Phoenician tradition, diphthongs are contracted without any consonantal indication of original diphtongs. The issue he tries to deal with is the authenticity of Balaam's oracles, the outcome being the reconstruction of these oracles in the older orthography and the proof for the initial postulation that they were written in the 12th century B.C. in circumstances that resemble closely the political situation of the biblical character and of the historical period (Albright 1944).

Albright's postulations were proved correct by the discoveries of dozens of clay tablets at Ugarit. The repetition of words and phrases sensed by C.F. Burney,[7] gained in specificity by Albright's careful examination of the Ugaritic poems in comparison with other Semitic poetic pieces in the limits of Semitic metrics. The basic characteristic of the UPy (henceforth UPy), which became obvious to Albright was that its verse-units (called cola) stand in complex relation to adjacent units, mainly simple parallelism which defined a set of two cola in relation, namely a bicolon.

In time this structure, built on the principle of repetition, suffered variations due to the evolution of the language. Therefore, in order to compensate for the obscurity inferred by the loss of vocalic endings (produced probably during the 13th century B.C.), parallelism was promoted more rigidly than before, implying even the word order, i.e. repetition of a specific unit in the same cluster. A quite representative variant of this device is the «tricolon», where parallelism includes three cola instead of two. Albright's method is composite, supplementing the orthographic reconstruction of the text with comparative studies of the poetic style and metrical forms of Ugaritic and Hebrew poems (Albright 1945).[8]

As far as poetic devices are concerned, Albright insisted on parallelism as the major characteristic of the old Canaanitic POETRY, therefore potentially traceable in early HPy too. Verses may be structured in tricola or bicola, and repetition is preferred

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[7]*The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (1922, Oxford: Clarendon, cf. pp 70 ff).

[8] A more thorough exposition of his method is recorded in his later book, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths*, which contains the lectures delivered in 1965 at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Defined as a reply to the virulent attack of the German extremists (either Romanticists or Idealists) on the historical value of HPy for the reconstruction of Israel's history, Albright's method deals mainly with dating the poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible. This concern is important not necessarily to do justice to the Canon but to scientific research itself, which traced in all ancient Near Eastern literatures the fact that POETRY preceded prose. On this observation he builds a theory of literary sequence-dating in Israel, then he checks it with all empirical data available in order to prove its certainty. Comparing changing poetic styles with historically meaningful content allows the researcher to approximate a date for stylistic modifications. Consequently a scale of phases of style is built on which he is able to date other archaic fragments embedded in prose narratives (Albright 1968, 3).

far and wide. As time went by, due to the new cultural influences predominantly Egyptian this time, parallelism lost in precision and value in Hebrew literature, being replaced by paronomasia (*figura etymologica*). Eventually, as opposed to UPy, Hebrew metre is rather tetrametric (2+2 beat) than hexametric (3+3 beat) (Albright 1968, 4-9).

Following the increase in the number of Ugaritic tablets discovered and the rise of the new field in archaeology and Semitic languages and literature, Cross and Freedman, Albright's disciples, started their career in this area by identifying poetic devices of Ugaritic origin in the POETRY of 'The Blessing of Moses'. They noted that symmetry (*parallelismus membrorum*) can appear both at the meaning level, at the structural level.

Among the several conclusions derived from this study are included the following. First, there is an average maximum divergence of one syllable, and one or two syllables between stresses, but not three. Second, a two-stresses verset (colon) may contain 4–6 syllables, and a three-stress verset may contain 6–9 syllables. Such rules are not to be applied rigidly because irregularities in metre may appear due to deliberate exceptions to produce special effects, to replacement of the original forms by newer ones originating in the Masoretic effort to preserve the pure consonantal text, or to textual corruptions. In spite of all these, the authors concluded that 'it is becoming increasingly clear that the early POETRY of Israel, like that of Ugarit, was quite regular in structure, and susceptible to quantitative metrical analysis'. To be noted that counting syllables is applied to the reconstructed text (Cross and Freedman 1948).

The method was soon crystallized and, on the basis of the previous studies and mainly Albright's own method, the authors ended up proposing two main techniques for the examination of early HPy. Thus, the analysis should start with a detailed

orthographic analysis, based on the comparative study of the Masoretic texts of the Hebrew Bible with the epigraphical material available, in the light of the reconstructed Semitic grammars and lexicographies, including Hebrew. This technique should lead to the reconstruction of the original Hebrew documents and provides us with a theory regarding the date of the document which has to be confirmed by the second technique. It follows a *linguistic analysis* based on the comparative study of the Hebrew texts reconstructed with the similar type of oriental texts, mainly Ugaritic, in the light of their linguistic structure and vocabulary, their poetic style and metrical forms. The plausibility of the event to which the text might refer is tested from this dual perspective and conclusions are drawn (Cross and Freedman 1975, 2–3).[9]

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[9] Among the characteristics of UPy new ones are added. Besides the principle of balance or symmetry (mainly on the pattern 3:3, but 2:2 is not uncommon, and even mixed patterns might appear) which confirmed its dominance, the metrical pattern of tricola is quite frequent and so even rhyme, which is characteristic of folk and bedouin POETRY. The balance of the cola can be altered, a situation which may guarantee the presence of a special poetic device: either a "ballast variant," or an extra-metrical foot (Cross and Freedman 1975, 6). Whilst regularly a poetic pattern of 3:3 can be traced in Hebrew literature, mixed patterns are not rare in ancient HPy (Cf. the metrical structure of Deborah's song [Cross and Freedman 1975, 14]). Similarly, even though the bicolon (3:3 or 2:2) is the basic unit, tricola (3:3:3 or 2:2:2) are quite common in Hebrew as it is in UPy, regularly appearing at random in a series of bicola, but occasionally serving as a climactic conclusion to the strophe. Another sign of the archaic HPy is climactic (repetitive) parallelism (e.g., Jdg. 5:17,23b, 27, 30b [Cross and Freedman 1975, 10–11]), which might have a variety of forms, but was replaced in later HPy by a formal and stilted repetitiveness. Eventually, the enumerative device is considered typical of old Canaanite POETRY (cf. "The Song of Deborah" [Cross and Freedman 1975, 13 n. x]). All these devices belong obviously to the stylistic field. They are supplemented by morphological characteristics which provide the database for a detailed set of grammatical archaisms (Cross and Freedman 1975, 18–25).

Narrowing down to the method itself, Freedman lays out several principles to be considered when metre has to be evaluated: (1) although there are minor problems which require emendations, the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible is reliable and is to be trusted; (2) segolate formations are to be treated as originally monosyllabic; (3) reconstructed vocalIs.tion of the pronominal suffixes are to be considered. Both Gray and Freedman applied their principles to acrostic POETRY as being less flexible than the rest of the HPy. Freedman's results indicate the tendency acrostic poems demonstrate, namely a variable length of 13–17 syllables, with an average of 7–8 syllables/verset. Lamentations 1–4 have the shortest lines, 13–14 syllables (Freedman 1980, 76).

Concerning the rhythm/metre of the HPy Freedman suggests three principles to clarify the issue: (1) practice proved that there is no single best system; syllable counting is considered better than stress counting, and is more precise; (2) scholars have to be aware that their expertise in prosodic devices a Hebrew poet might have been using may not correspond to poet's manoeuvres to communicate his own intentions; (3) although orality is a plausible process, oral and written categories are difficult to be kept separate with respect to HPy. Freedman advocates for a specific structure the Hebrew poet might have had at his disposal when he proceeded to compose his poem, structure being defined most probably in terms of number of syllables/line and acrostic lines. Poetic originality consists in the degree of flexibility the poet conciously assumed to cross over the traditional paradigm.

In spite of a long career, Freedman ended up being obviously certain, perhaps even frustrated, that he could not identify with certainty a metre that could provide meaning for the structure of HPy, but his scientific mindset and refined common sense prevent him from unproved conclusions.

> The pages of scholarly journals and commentaries are strewn with the wreckage left by the advocates of this approach, and there is a general feeling that while the investment of time, effort, and ingenuity was great, the returns have proved to be small. Not many poetic reconstructions have survived critical scrutiny very long. While newer approaches and methods have been more respectful and conservative regarding the established text and successes have been registered in the case of individual poems, overall the gains have not been very impressive. (Freedman 1980, 6)

Whilst he had such sharp words about the extreme application of this method, Freedman promoted a moderate version and even conducted research on it.[10] He remains faithful to the conviction that metrical studies by themselves might have a tricky value if not balanced by other scientific techniques (Freedman 1987, 11).

Although both *reconstructing* POETRY and *recognising* POETRY are considered scientific from a methodological viewpoint and acceptable from a heuristic viewpoint, recognizing a specific work of literature as POETRY is closer to our interest. However, there are insights proven as facts by Albright and his disciples which cannot be neglected. The grammatical terseness of the poems manifested by avoiding some regular particles, and the connection between an early dating and rudimentary style as well as that between late dating and flamboyant style, may be of value in our

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[10] Howard (1997) is a good illustration of Freedman's method applied to pss structure. He traces his method back to Alter's literary critical method, Francke's new literary criticism and Freedman's syllable/stress counting (pp. 23–5): it is literary in essence, synchronical by definition and canonical by extension. Counting syllables and stresses, as repeatedly mentioned, is not considered a method in itself, but just a supportive method for literary criticism. Even though the Masoretic text is promoted as *textus receptus*, the method applied to syllables/stress counting is minimalist, namely as regards a reconstructed version of the MT. Accordingly segholate nouns are counted as one syllable, *patah furtivum* is ignored and resolved diphtongs in the absolute nouns are read as monosyllabic. It is through form analysis Howard gets to the structure of the psalm. In the second part of his study, while tending to organize the data into an argument for a solid canonical view on this psalms' unity, Howard refers from time to time to devices which are not far from discourse analysis, such as key-word links and thematic connections. By organising these themes into specific categories, Howard subscribes to structuralism but he stops half-way through. Eventually, the consumation of his study is canonical, namely pss 93–100 were proven to be a unity, a redactional craftwork. The method is composite.

enterprise.[11] They provide for us a controlling principle of where to look for the relevant

parallel texts among the cognate languages and literatures.

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[11] Consequently, there are two basic structural types that came out of this study: a simpler one, more traditional, with fairly regular metrical patterns and symetrical stanza structures (e.g. psalm 113), and a more complex one, while having much greater variation in line length and stanza construction regularity is still preserved (e.g. Lamentations 1–3). This is based on the assumption that simple things precede the complex, but this is contradicted by the history of ideas where the complex comes first. Actually he accepted this proof when he admitted the possibility that Hebrew literature was at first poetic, as all the other time immemorial Semitic literatures were (Freedman 1980, 11). On this basis he talks of an "Israelite adaptation" of the Semitic literary pattern, where the transfer from POETRY to prose really happens. This position was promoted at first by R. Kittel, U. Cassuto and W.F. Albright, who were talking of a poetic substratum the Hebrew prose has. Its only problem is that it is difficult to prove. The only alternative left is that the original author used the prosaic and/or prosodic devices as he pleased in order to achieve his purposes (moral and/or esthetic). Weitzman (1997) considers that POETRY was a later inovation, and poetic passages were inserted in the narrative texts for various reasons, with theological significance and canonical effect. Nevertheless, human writing history have started, as far as I know, with more complicated and abstract systems which came down only lately to sound graphemes. Similar, mythology (ancient equivalent of present day philosophy) was complex from the beginning.

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