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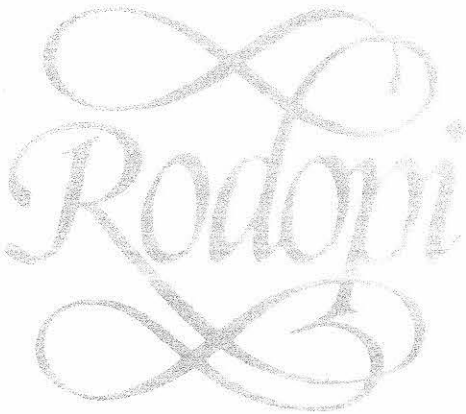

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"Unimaginable imaginer"

The Dark Jester

Hena Maes-Jelinek

— *In memoriam* Anna Rutherford —

Do I imagine reality
Or does the real imagine me?
Unimaginable imaginer
What part does the imagined play?
Kathleen Raine[1]

WILSON HARRIS QUOTES THE LAST TWO LINES of this poem by Kathleen Raine as an epigraph to *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993). The poem as a whole, however, expresses as pointedly a major aspect of the narrative process in *The Dark Jester*. The protagonist who, in diverse roles, assumes the multilayered "personality of Dream,"[2] is hard to perceive as a full substantial being. But as a creative agent himself obsessed by the "mystery of art" (23) and its origins, he can be seen as a human version of the "unimaginable imaginer" who attempts to engage in dialogue with the historical 'imagined' characters who emerge from his unconscious, "Non-Self seeking its Opposite called Self" (7).

Many of Harris's novels are prefaced with a note by the narrator, whether Clive Goodrich in *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975) or W.H. in *The Waiting Room* (1967) and most of the later novels. He pres-

[1] Kathleen Raine, untitled poem, in *Living with Mystery: Poems 1987-91* (Ipswich: Golgonooza P, 1992): 90.

[2] Wilson Harris, *The Dark Jester* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001): 1. Further page references are in the main text.

ents himself as the editor[3] of the manuscript, a mediator who "translates" and gives form to a fictional substance recorded by the novels' protagonists in a log-book (*The Waiting Room*), papers and diaries (*Companions*), records of automatic writing (*The Angel at the Gate*, 1982) or the protagonist's dream-book in the later fiction. The assumption is therefore that the writer is not the exclusive creator of a narrative that breaks down the barriers of individual authorship and that he captures the compulsions of a multiple creativity. The writer and, at a further remove, his protagonist are involved in a creative "mutual agency"[4] – the two-way process in the course of which they move towards the fictionalized substance that erupts of its own intentionality into their individual consciousness. In most of the novels, this substance arises from the so-called void of Caribbean history, whether individual, social or political, a void which, to Harris, has always been apparent only. As suggested in *The Waiting Room*, it implies that "a fiction which appears to grasp *nothingness* runs close to a freedom of reality which is *somethingness*."[5] In Harris's eyes all experience, however deeply buried in the chasms of historical or individual memory, forms an inexhaustible pool, part of a wholeness never entirely grasped but surfacing in variable forms or masks, yet another feature of its multiple creative potential. This composite reality, nourished by a "deposit of ghosts,"[6] partakes of the unconscious and of what Harris calls in different contexts "the womb of space" or "Spirit". To put it succinctly, it is also linked to other major energizing agents of the creative process in his fiction: the sacred, the mythic and the archetypal.

In their twin journey into outer landscape and inner psyche, Harris's protagonists are faced with the question, first clearly formulated in *Heartland*, of "*whom* and *what*"[7] lies in the mysterious nameless dimen-

[3] Paula Burnett comments on this in "Memory Theatre and the Maya: Othering Eschatology in Wilson Harris's *Jonestown*," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 221.

[4] Wilson Harris, "A Note on re-visionary cycles in the composition of *Carnival*" (April 1991). Wilson Harris papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas. Courtesy of Vera Kutzinski.

[5] Wilson Harris, *The Waiting Room* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967): 10.

[6] Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987): 1.

[7] Wilson Harris, *Heartland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964): 40.

sion they are penetrating with reluctance, misgivings and an incipient terror. One would have thought that the emergence of Ghost, in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, as "numinous scarecrow, the numinous victim, who (or is it which?) secretes himself, herself, itself in our dreams,"[8] that this apparition was an ultimate expression of the 'who' or 'what' in the subterranean dimension explored.

The Dark Jester, however, takes us even further into that territory or, as in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, into the "parent Imagination."[9] The unsigned preface entitled "Fragment of a Dream" confronts the reader, this time without a mediator, with the anonymous voice of a Dreamer, which makes us wonder 'who' or 'what' is dreaming,[10] for the fragment seems to be *both* part of the dream that initiates the narrative *and* the partial mysterious Dreamer himself. Yet his is not a disembodied voice but that of a material / immaterial being (14) who appears to move on an intermediary plane between concrete living nature and a shadow world of forms or, in his own words, of "live fossil organs" (vii), "dusty [...] buried [...] but still alive" (50) and reactivated "in dream-design" (86). As Bone says in *Jonestown*, "I dreamt I was translating from a fragmented text [...] that already existed ..."[11]

Dreaming in Harris's fiction is an intuitive epistemological opening into the unconscious, the secret motivations as well as undigested woes it harbours, and, above all, the mainspring of creativity. The Dreamer in *The Dark Jester* could be "an extension from Ghost", who, when returning to the great deeps in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, echoes Hamlet's father's appeal "Remember me"[12] and calls for another hand to take up the narrative of human history. The other hand here re-creates the encounter between the conquistador Pizarro and the last pre-Conquest

[8] *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1.

[9] Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990): 125.

[10] David Punter asks a fairly similar question about *Palace of the Peacock* in *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000): 44.

[11] Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996): 7. See also: "The dream was jesting with the dreamers. The dream spoke"; *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993): 154.

[12] *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 82, 88.

Inca, Atahualpa. Nevertheless, as in earlier novels in which Harris frees history from a delimited temporal frame, this historical event is embedded in a quintessential vision of mankind's existence "across ages" (vii) and opens onto a meditation on man's relations with other living species and on his place in nature and the cosmos "across times" (x). It even tries to capture the beauty and the terror that emanated from them "before the times of man" (13). As Harris often says, it is a fiction that transcends a merely human discourse.[13] This meditation and the imaginative quest it initiates are also a process of self-judgement, a recurring feature in the progress towards self-knowledge of Harris's protagonists.

Retrieved from the womb of time and from the prison house of colonial history, the Inca strikes the Dreamer's imagination as a spark ignited "on the edge of death or of life" (2) and apparently emerging from a "divide between Self and Non-Self" (7), a "frail opposite to [him]self" (3): ie, the Dreamer. The spark or distant "seed" generates the reconstitution of the past and induces the same kind of reversing visionary process[14] the Dreamer admires in masterpieces of painting and sculpture: a Byzantine icon in which the Christ-child gives birth to its mother's soul, and Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà* with Christ supporting the unfinished form of His mother. To give some idea of the concise density of the text, the parenting child is also a quantum particle spreading out and generating "waves of space" (4). This isn't just a counterpoint to history as "approved by a dominant culture" (1). Implicitly, it conveys the necessity for man to take into account inescapable natural forces rather than envisaging life in merely social and political terms.

Like Bone in *Jonestown*, the Dreamer (or shall I say W.H.?) is obsessed "by cities and settlements in the Central and South Americas" that are still an enigma today, and he too dreams "of their abandonment, their bird-masks, their animal-masks."[15] Such enigmas, the incomprehensible surrender of the powerful Inca to Pizarro and his handful of men but also the abandoned sanctuaries of Vilcabamba in Peru and Palenque in Mexico, have been absorbed into a shadow World theatre through which the Dreamer attempts to approach, if only in some degree, the riddles of history and the unseizable origins of creation. In his backward and forward reconstruction of historical events, he conducts a dialogue with the Dark Jester, a persona who already appears in Harris's early work as an artist prepared to risk identifying himself "with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples."[16] He is not an idealized character but, as Margaret Harris's epigraphic poem suggests, one who moves between the living and the dead, an ambivalent participant in the joys and sorrows of mankind.

He is here a further development of Mr Mageye, Bone's "Magus-Jester" in *Jonestown*. Half-man, half-god, through whom the laughter of the gods resonates, the Jester is also a major performer, a creator of "diverse arts" (16) in the Play of World theatre and, as such, incorporates in himself at some stage both Pizarro and the Bishop who converted Atuahalpa. But in spite of the layers of experience he encompasses, he is not an omniscient elucidator of the dark areas of history. Rather, these layers are so many windows opening *through* him to a reality that is still *beyond* him (46).

Conversely, the archetypal translator whom the Dreamer sees in Palenque interprets aspects of that immanent reality.[17] The Jester, the

[13] See, among others, "Profiles of Myth and the New World," in *Nationalism vs Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. Wolfgang Zach & Ken L. Goodwin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1996): 77–86.

[14] Vera Kutzinski, "Realism and Reversibility in Wilson Harris's *Carnival*," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 147–67.

[15] *Jonestown*, 4.

[16] See Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) and *Companions of the Day and Night* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975). See also *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (Georgetown, Guyana: The National History and Arts Council. Ministry of Information and Culture, 1970): 17. On this subject, see Helen Tiffin, "The Metaphor of Anancy in Caribbean Literature," in *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick (Essays and Monograph Series 1; Adelaide: CRNLE, 1982): 15–52.

[17] The translator is at first Pizarro's actual translator later transfigured into the watchman/translator in Palenque. On the significance of translation in Wilson Harris's work, see Stephanos Stephanides, "Goddesses, Ghosts and Translatability in Wilson Harris's *Jonestown*," in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 2.1–3 (Spring 2000): 233–41.

translator and the Dreamer himself are thus related nameless allegorical figures of the "underworld imagination"[18] at work in the dreaming process. Hence the "dark" identity-less persona of the Jester, whose voice sometimes fades "in the darkness of the void" (52). As a matter of fact, all the characters arise, as it were, from various layers of the Dreamer's unconscious and consciousness, and from the "recesses of humanity" (2) he explores while attempting to bridge the chasms in history or different kinds of being and behaviour. They are actors in both the World theatre the Dreamer visualizes and in the personal drama of self-judgement to which he submits as a way of modifying his previously one-sided world-view:

> I am judged for acts I performed without understanding the shapes of lust I mistook for a whole being. An acute judgement painful and desolating, and yet it brings a spark or particle of relief from a tight-fitting nature. Other facets, other faces, other sides to nature begin an immense liberation in breaking absolutes into partial organs. (vii)

"Breaking absolutes into partial organs" allows the Dreamer to delve into unacknowledged factors while attempting to respond to the existential multifaceted enquiry echoing through the narrative in apparently different but related questions: "What is jest?" "What is history?" "What is art?" "What is prophecy?" Although also scattered through the narrative, the answers to these questions are all linked; they are not final pronouncements, but probings into contrasting, not mutually exclusive, interpretations, each pregnant with the very elements that give access to their reverse. For example, it is by first re-living the accepted version of Atahualpa's capture by Pizarro that the Dreamer breaks through it towards a possible redemptive significance of his trial.

The Jester guides the Dreamer in his uncertain progression between the divisions, paradoxes, opposites and adversarial forces within himself, in the historical characters he evokes, and in the reality he plumbs. As in earlier novels, the Jester's art lies in an irony that dislodges or melts frozen, one-sided assumptions and in a dialectical humour he now shares with the archetypal translator. One major paradox blends the urgency of the quest with the impossibility of its full realization.

[18] *History, Fable and Myth*, 17.

Hence the Dreamer's answer to his own question: "Jest is an attempt to bridge the apparently unbridgeable" (vii). What seems unbridgeable is the chasm that separates Atahualpa from Pizarro, pre-Conquest from post-Conquest times, but also the many closures we erect in all spheres in an ordering of life which the Dreamer calls "Cartesian form" (16). Harris has often drawn attention to the limitations of Cartesian logic and its anthropomorphic interpretation of the world, contrasting it with a phenomenal legacy and a tradition, perceivable still in pre-Columbian art, which implies, as he says, a "treaty of sensibility between human presence on this planet and the animal kingdom."[19] It finds expression in the novel in a swaying bridge between "animal passion" and "human spirit" (4) or, conversely, between "human passion" and "animal spirit" (8, 10, 23), a reversal which illustrates the "treaty of sensibility" between the two species. This is manifest in the Inca iconography, the blending of human, animal and cosmic features in myths that inspire in the Dreaming narrator a poetic "Atahualpan" as opposed to the "Cartesian Form".

Atahualpan form eludes the common-sense, rigid differentiations between sensorial perceptions and their usual representation in Western art. One penetrates a dimension in which all boundaries between categories of being and between the senses dissolve. Although the Dreamer calls himself a twentieth-century man (5), in his search for the lost resources of humanity he participates in a ballet of creation in which emotions take on tangible shapes. For example, conflicting moods, like anger and laughter, materialize into an incandescent Bird (3–4) which may be part of the Dreamer's fossil antecedents, for its song, also a "theme of opposites" (22), stimulates his understanding of an ancestral parentage between all creatures (5), while his sense organs' perceptions overlap:

> My unnerved [...] eyes *heard* the cry of the Bird. I had seen the incandescent creature with the nerves of art. I dreamt I had stumbled on the Atahualpan parentage of the Universe by the Sun and by other Suns. I listened with new ears, new eyes, in my Dream. And I heard and saw the strange muted and muffled cry of the Bird in tones, however, that

[19] Wilson Harris, "Imagination, Dead, Imagine: Bridging a Chasm," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7.1 (1994): 185.

made me gasp. It was singing a mysterious mutual cry of several voices in one. (20–21)

And also: "to *see* and to *read* a *mute*, indescribable signal, is the art of Jest" (18). A famous violinist said recently that music is what comes between the notes.[20] The silent music "threaded between space and time"[21] gives the narrative its formal imaginary structure in an attempt to give access to the non-verbal reality that underlies it. It is the living essence that informs the creatures on the Moon, the animals, the rhythms and tones of the orchestrated ballet; or, to use one of the Dreamer's expressions, it is "the blood of infinity" (3). In a remarkable passage, the Bird's music turns into an "elusive chord of snake-like sun," then into the "*Feathered Serpent*" (22), a South American version of the Mexican Quetzalcoatl, now a metaphor for the unseizable transcendental.

Atahualpan form also conveys the Inca's predicament in mythopoetic serpent imagery. The Dreamer evokes Atahualpa's appearance unarmed along with his retainers, soon to be massacred on the big square in Cajamarca. His robe is covered with golden serpents, "beads of waving sun" (25) intimating the mythological affiliation of the Inca with the Sun, his father. But the serpent also embodies Pizarro's cold-blooded reptilian intensity (8). On the other hand, when the Dreamer attempts to warn Atahualpa against his incautious welcome of Pizarro, he is first threatened by the mythological serpents then spared, unlike Laocoön, who had warned the Trojans against the Greeks' wooden horse and was smothered by snakes along with his sons.

Major implications emerge from this fusion of the pre-Columbian and Greek mythological serpents. First, a distinction needs to be made between the "absolute prediction" (38) of the Greek version, which bespeaks a deterministic view of life and a submission to fate when Laocoön's prediction is indeed fulfilled, and the Dreamer's "prophetic

[20] Isaac Stern, "La musique, c'est ce qu'il y a entre les notes," *Le Vif/L'Express* (22 décembre 2000): 40.

[21] Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. & intro. A.J.M. Bundy (Readings in Postcolonial Literature 1; London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 40.

art" (43, 83).[22] This was adumbrated in *Jonestown*, where Bone explains that "to sail back in the past is to come upon 'pasts' that are 'futures' to previous 'pasts' and so *ad infinitum* [...] within the [...] womb of time."[23] The Dreamer's voyage into timelessness is both another partial, freer movement towards the source of creativeness and an opportunity to revise the doom of history.

The other original re-visioning of Homeric myth is the import of the Greek ruse, Ulysses' wooden horse.[24] Pizarro enters the square in Cajamarca with two other horsemen, his wooden heart blind and indifferent, like the Greeks in Troy, to the immaterial processions welcoming him and the hospitality he receives. It brings to mind colonial encounters all over the world when many native populations unsuspectingly welcomed their conquerors. Yet the wooden horse does not introduce an alien enemy only but, as the Jester insists, "it brings an enemy within of our own making" (14). Though "no absolute disclosure exists to unravel motivation,"[25] and "truth itself is not fixed" (17), the Dreamer's intuition is that Atahualpa's self-division, his awareness of the "corruption of empires" (28), made him lower his defences and prompted him to reverse "millennia of conquest" (31) by welcoming Pizarro. Nevertheless, the narrative in no way claims to be an accurate account of the conquest of Peru. On the contrary: uncertainty is conspicuous in the Dreamer's questioning journey, tentative intuitions, and intimations of the infinite.

As suggested above, it appears from the Dreamer's journey (as in earlier novels) that historical or individual experience never dies completely but rests in a fossilized state or near-extinction, to be retrieved by memory; which is why, in his "self-judgement", the Dreamer "revive[s] an unfinished tone and rhythm within an Imagination that exists in chasms between human spirit and animal nature" (vii) and also perceives Atahualpa's "non-termination" and "arrival in the late

[22] On this subject, see Samuel Durrant's essay in this volume.

[23] *Jonestown*, 5.

[24] For a comment on Harris's diverse re-creations of this myth, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's Trilogy," *Callaloo* 18.1 (Winter 1995): 46–58.

[25] "Imagination, Dead, Imagine," 190.

twentieth century" (3). Although Harris has always drawn his fictional sources from unacknowledged features in human experience, in this philosophical and psychological narrative he shows more clearly than ever that the hidden side of history in both communal and individual psyche is the territory of art. In this respect at least, fiction is no invented story but reality itself or, as Harris says, "texts of being,"[26] while art is both the purpose of the Dreamer's quest and its animating force or prime mover: "Art transcends the material of which it is made [...]. [I]t lies [...] in a consciousness of timelessness we cannot seize" (11–12). At some stage in his reconstruction, the Dreamer wonders: "is it the unbearable wings of impossible / possible re-generation blown by art across ages, across centuries?" (60). Obviously, then, the narrator's concern is less with the accuracy of facts than with the capacity of mind and soul to apprehend the essentiality of being within the manifest texture of events, behaviour and even dogmatic dispositions, as when the Dreamer perceives the inner face of the rigidly orthodox Spanish Bishop. No creature or form of life is immune from vulnerability. Not only Atahualpa evinces a wound which, in his reconstruction, the Dreamer shares with him, even Pizarro and Cortez cannot entirely conceal the vulnerability they have in common with their victims. Moreover, the wounds and chasms generated by history are paralleled by "the wounds in the earth [...] before time began" (57). The major images in the novel are all of divisions, abysses, chasms, both in men and nature, expressing a kinship between humanity and what Harris calls "the life of the earth."[27]

Such ontological vulnerability opens the way to the sources of creativity: "each wound was a window into a tree of life" (13). And further: "I sensed [Cortez'] infirmity as a complex window through which I looked into possibilities [...] of a constant soul" (91). Similarly, the darkness of the void subsequent to Atahualpa's fall, a void dense with his unseen sorrowing people and their silent voices, the precipice in Palenque where the Dreamer penetrates the darkness of oblivion – all are the variable seats of the Dreamer's discovery of the frontiers of

[26] Wilson Harris, "The Fabric of the Imagination," in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 23.

[27] See his essay in this volume.

regeneration (51) and the possible transmutation of ruin into origin (41), just as the darkest corners of his dream are a threshold into truth (76). This remains the fundamental dynamic of Harris's fiction, which brings together history, the potential reversal of its consequences through the converting irony of jest, and art. It emphasizes the necessity to revive a pre-Columbian world-view both as a way of bringing back to life cultures enshrouded by conquest and as a way of compensating for the Faustian technological civilization it initiated, even if one can never escape completely the temptations of one's own age.

All through the narrative, apparently hard, inanimate matter is alive, informed by the immanent Spirit at the core of all life.[28] Stone and rocks were never inanimate in Harris's fiction. Here again they are humanized, and the ruined stone walls of Tiahuanaco "echo [...] with the shadow of flesh and blood" (59). Gold arouses only greed and ferocity in Pizarro, who melts the treasures of the Inca's ransom, in his eyes mere pagan idols. But, for Atahualpa, gold is "a map of the stars [...] of the Sun" (12) and "possesses a sensation of innermost sparkling fire" (73). It lives in the cross Atahualpa rejected when the Bishop tried to force it on him and blends with the rope around his neck after his execution, the embodiment of his victimization. Above all, it lives in Eldorado, the man of gold, whose glittering body can be bought or sold. In the underworld of the Americas, the Dreamer discovers, beneath that glitter, flesh on a plank in the belly of a slave-ship sailing the Middle Passage. Art is rooted in that suffering flesh:

> Then it was that I saw the first work of art (was it the first, had I forgotten the others?) in the inner Underworld of the Kings of America. Half-flesh, half-work-of-art. A stretched figure, cruelly placed on a plank, in the belly of a slave-ship. A man of gold. I jumped as I flew and watched myself from above. El Dorado, the King of Africa and America, in a slave-ship. (98–99)

Apart from the opposite meanings of gold, the convertible power of language – which, to Harris, signifies the potential conversion of real-

[28] On the subject of "Spirit", see Paget Henry, "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Poeticism," in *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York & London: Routledge, 2000): 90–114.

ity, of the meaning of one thing into its opposite - is perhaps best illustrated in the rendering of the metaphysical notion of suspension. In the novel's version of Atahualpa's execution, he hangs suspended from a rope. But in the subsequent transfigurations of his doom, fate is suspended as Atahualpa loses his kingly garment (46) and, "within freedom's paradoxical originality" (42), liberated in space and time, is suspended "in the past and the present and the future" (82). He attains a precarious, uncertain, always to be restored balance in the existential process, while the Dreamer sums up his own progress:

> I had travelled fictionally, it seemed, across centuries to approach a form I called Atahualpa, to know him and it, to know a living/dead form and substance that differed in its dying, in its living, from anything by which I had been conditioned in a dominant history, a dominant cultural history. (102)

In keeping with Harris's own fictional journey, there is no conclusion to the novel. As in *Jonestown* when Bone agrees to be judged instead of Deacon, killed by Jones and wearing his head, the Dreamer, at the climax of his "self-judgement", identifies wholly with Tupac Amaru, the last legitimate Inca, executed like his uncle Atahualpa. Whereas Bone is pushed and falls from a cliff "into a net of music,"[29] the Dreamer stands on the scaffold like the historical victim he has become, hearing a music that sings of a "hidden Ship in a Hidden City no one has yet found though it still endures with the promise of creation on Land and on the Sea" (109). Both dreamers fade into the unfinished imaginary realm which their narrative has momentarily brought to light.

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[29] *Jonestown*, 233.

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