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Possibility of Self-Representation: the Assimilation of Paul de Man's Theories in John Banville's *Shroud*

Notice biographique

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Résumé

Shroud de John Banville, publié en 2002, peut être lu comme un exemple de «métafiction historiographique». Le roman fonde en effet son protagoniste, Axel Vander, sur la vie de Paul de Man, le théoricien littéraire, dont les écrits dans un journal pro-nazi ont été découverts à titre posthume par Ortwin de Graef. Ce récit prend la forme d'une confession autobiographique, tout en s'appuyant sur les théories de Paul de Man concernant la question de la référentialité et le problème d'(auto-) représentation. En outre, selon de Man, le discours de l'autobiographie implique un processus d'«auto-restauration» par lequel le sujet confère à lui-même un masque dans le but de cacher l'absence d'un moi authentique et cohérent. Cependant, un problème se pose lorsque la langue devient le support de cette représentation (DE MAN, 1979) : loin de refléter le «vrai» moi, la langue devient le moyen même de la fabrication de masques. En résulte un « malaise » d'indécidabilité pour le narrateur. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser *Shroud* en le lisant avec le texte de de Man intitulé «L'autobiographie en tant que de-facement» et de montrer comment le langage vient se poser comme l'agent qui déstabilise le discours même qu'il vise à restaurer. Après avoir démontré comment l'autobiographie entraîne une crise de l'autorité et de la représentation pour le narrateur, nous tâcherons, cependant, de démontrer qu'Axel peut apparaître comme un « noyau irréductible », ce qui subsiste à ce que de Man appelle « a linguistic predicament. » Je constaterai également que ce noyau est incarné par la voix en tant que dimension du réel lacanien.

Abstract

John Banville's *Shroud* (2002) can be read as an example of «historiographic metafiction» in which he bases his protagonist, Axel Vander, on the life of Paul de Man, the deconstructionist literary theorist, whose early writings for a pro-Nazi newspaper were posthumously uncovered by Ortwin de Graef. This first

person account takes the form of an autobiographical confession while simultaneously drawing on Paul de Man's own deconstructionist theories regarding the question of referentiality and the problem of (self-)representation insofar as it is mediated by language. In addition, according to de Man, the discourse of autobiography entails the process of « self-restoration » whereby the *I* persona confers upon him/herself a mask through narration in an attempt to hide one's lack of authentic self. However, the problem arises when language becomes the medium of such representation (DE MAN, 1979). Far from mirroring the « true » self, language, as a constructing agent, becomes the very means of mask-making, deterring forever the process of an authentic representation. This, in turn, produces an « uncomfortable » feeling of undecidability with regards to the narrator's notion of self. The aim of this essay is to read Banville's *Shroud* along with de Man's idea of « autobiography as de-facement » and show how language comes to posit itself as the agent that destabilizes the very discourse it aims to restore, that is, the author's sense of coherent self. After demonstrating how the discourse of autobiography entails a crisis of authorship and representation for the narrator, I will, however, argue that Axel comes across an irreducible kernel which he identifies as an « enduring core » which somehow remains outside what de Man calls « a linguistic predicament, » a kernel embodied by the voice as a dimension of Jacques Lacan's category of the Real.

Mots-clés: Banville, *Shroud*, représentation du moi, autobiographie, de Man, Lacan, voix.

Key words: Banville, *Shroud*, self-representation, autobiography, de Man, Lacan, voice.

Introduction

John Banville returns to his familiar theme of the relationship between fiction and reality in *Shroud*, another example of what Linda Hutcheon calls « historiographic metafiction » (HUTCHEON, 1989 : 3). Here, Banville bases his protagonist, Axel Vander, on the life of Paul de Man, the deconstructionist literary theorist, whose early writings for a pro-Nazi newspaper were posthumously uncovered by the Belgian scholar, Ortwin de Graef. This first person account takes the form of an autobiographical confession while simultaneously drawing on de Man's own deconstructionist theories regarding the question of referentiality and the

problem of (self-)representation insofar as it is mediated by language¹. I will start by reading *Shroud* in relation to Paul de Man's « history » as well as theory of representation. I will then examine the degree to which Banville assimilates de Man's theory—primarily, his theory of autobiography—and, finally, I will show how he moves away from de Man in order to explore a form of subjectivity which can be illustrated more lucidly in Jacques Lacan's formulations. My theoretical focus will be chiefly placed on de Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (DE MAN, 1984) together with Mladen Dolar's Lacanian reading of the voice in his *A Voice and Nothing More* (DOLAR, 2006). First, let us look at the story.

Shroud depicts Axel Vander, an aging academic in turmoil struggling with a troubled past and present physical agony. Axel's career as a renowned literary theorist is highly reminiscent of Paul de Man's. Like de Man, he moves to the United States to pursue a career in literary studies which is mainly concerned with the Romantics. He fashions a reputation in the literary departments of his time, a reputation that is almost toppled to notoriety by a revelation of a dark past. We are told in the beginning of the novel that he receives a letter from an Irish student named Cass Cleave threatening to unveil his pro-Nazi collaborationist past. Further into the novel, however, we realize that he fears the revelation of yet another « darker » secret: he is not Axel Vander. He had in fact « purloined » his friend's identity while escaping across a war-stricken Europe as Axel Vander. The « real » Axel had died before our narrator planned his trip avoiding Nazi persecution for being Jewish.

¹ Elke D'hoker has previously used de Man's essay to read Banville's *The Untouchable* in which she sees a « surprising convergence » between Banville's narrative's « metaphoric diction » and de Man's essay. Although my essay initially follows a similar argument concerning *Shroud*, it will diverge substantially by incorporating Lacanian theory (D'HOKER, 2004 : 203).

1. Autobiography

He claims that the aim of this narrative is to « explain myself, to myself, and to you » (5)² and refers to the text as « this record » (396) or « this confession » (261) suggesting it to be a form of confessional autobiography by exploring memories of the past. Indeed, any autobiographical discourse draws on memory and Banville has always been fascinated by the nature of memory and the way the past becomes inscribed in human consciousness. In his first major work of fiction, *Birchwood*, the narrator says : « We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past » (Banville, 1973 : 12). In other words, the way we remember past events constructs a meaningful story in order for us to understand the past. Consequently, one starts to question the innocence of memory as such, that they are truthful inscriptions of authentic experiences. So, at best, one could argue, memories are fictions with which the subject narrates a coherent story of his/her past in order to make sense of, perhaps, an otherwise absurd existence. Therefore, autobiography cannot simply be a truthful account of a life-history since it draws primarily on bits and scraps of memory one keeps of oneself. To put it in Freudian-Lacanian terms, what the subject depicts in his autobiography is the way he perceives his sense of self or ego which, according to Lacan, is based primarily on a series of imaginary identifications³.

By using an autobiographical discourse in a fictional novel, Banville seems once again to complicate the distinction between reality, authenticity and fiction. By basing a fictional character on the life of a real historical figure, i.e. Paul de Man, he seems to agree with de Man himself who blurs the supposed distinction between autobiography and fiction and claims that

² All references to *Shroud* will henceforth be indicated in bracketed page numbers.

³ Lacan locates the ego in what he calls the imaginary order. He argues that the ego, or one's sense of self, originates during the mirror stage where the child identifies his image in a mirror. He/She then derives his sense of « I » from this image (LACAN, 2006).

contrary to the assumption that « life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces consequences » it is « the autobiographical project » itself that produces and determines the life it is aiming to portray (DE MAN, 1984 : 69). De Man's idea is that the « life » narrated by autobiographical persona is not necessarily the same life that was lead by the author himself. Rather, its narration is constantly undermined « by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of [the] medium » (1984 : 69). Autobiography for de Man is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. If this is the case, then autobiography as such does not exist and what remains is a body of textual representation whose authenticity one is never able to « authentically » ascertain. Aware of the resulting undecidability Axel equates story with history (91) and calls history « a hotchpotch of anecdotes, neither true nor false » (49) reaffirming its textuality.

2.1. Autobiography and Masking

Axel remarks towards the end of the novel that, all along, he has « manufactured a voice » and a « reputation » which is not authentically his (329). He finds himself in the position of an actor in the ancient world:

“I think of an actor in the ancient world [...] The crowd knows him but cannot remember his name [...] He has his mask [...] The white clay from which it was fashioned has turned to the shade and texture of bone [...] it fits smoothly upon the contours of his face. Increasingly, indeed, he thinks the mask is more like his face than his face is [...] Man and mask are one.” (286-287)

Having been living by the name « Axel Vander » for so long the narrator finds it difficult, if not impossible, to unearth his « true » face underneath the mask of « Axel Vander ». In other words, he is unable to conceive of himself independently from the name « Axel ». Like the ancient actor, he has become his mask.

Although his identity as Axel is a « manufactured » one, this seems all that he can hold onto. He has become « Axel Vander ».

One can read the relation between self and mask in light of de Man's understanding of *prosopopeia* which he identifies as the trope of autobiographical discourse. He sees it as « the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech » (1984 : 76). Furthermore, de Man observes that *prosopopeia* is a figure of speech which means « face making » for to have a voice metonymically implies having a mouth, and to have a mouth implies having a face. Fabricating a face thus becomes an inevitable process of self-representation.

In addition, the moment the subject engages in representing his « self, » he becomes caught in what de Man calls the « figural field » of language which inescapably posits the subject in figuration—the process of both providing and creating a figure (DE MAN, 1979 : 270.). To put it differently, since the means by which one attempts at fashioning an autobiography is language, one can never escape the constructive aspect of language games. Thus, as a result of the figurality of language self-representation as such is not quite possible. Instead, one is invited to read autobiography as self-*construction* manufactured by the autobiographical face/voice.

One of the ramifications of such a reading is that one is never able to acquire a « true » representation of whom one « really » is. Or, rather, the only way one can access his or her « true » self is its representation since there is no other way to access the « original » self. This is a view which is constantly entertained by Banville in various narratives and *Shroud* is no exception. For instance, Axel mentions having written a book entitled « The Alias as Salient Fact: The Nominative Case in the Quest for Identity » (100) which he discusses later when he muses on his identity as being/not being Axel Vander :

“If, as I believe, as I insist, there is no essential, singular self, what is it exactly I am supposed to have escaped by pretending to be Axel Vander? Mere being, that insupportable medley of effects, desires, fears, tics, twitches? To be someone else is to be one thing and one thing only.” (286)

If, like history, identity too is textual and thus not innate, and if one's sense of self is a mere story one tells or hears about oneself, then there is no original self to be uncovered from beneath the fictional mask. If real being includes an incoherent « medley of effects, » then being « someone else » seems a more convenient alternative since, at least, it involves being « one thing only » rather than a myriad of incoherent things. That is the « salient fact » of Axel's identity. Indeed, we as readers need to continue referring to our narrator as Axel because he does not provide us with his name before he became Axel.

2.2. Autobiography and Defacement

Insofar as the narrator has no original identity behind the mask of Axel, his self-conscious writing of his life-story destabilizes his reality as well as his sense of self. Far from rendering his sense of self more meaningful, his autobiographical discourse proves all the more complicated resulting, in turn, in the occasional unknotting of his reality as well as a series of incoherent selves. He claims that « my pretence falsehoods [...] had come back to undo me » (12) and he speaks of his « gradual process of thinning and fading » (381). He also complains that the « margins of my world were disappearing » (18) and refers to moments when he feels not to be « wholly present... not so much a person as a contingency, misplaced and adrift in time » (68-69). He notices others' « faceless shadows standing before them in the glass » (341) and during a dream-like epiphany he perceives « a bloated, faceless thing » (351) approaching him from above threatening voicelessly to attack. The disintegration of his coherent self is also accompanied by his physical deterioration; aging, rotting, and smelling like « something that had died under a bush » (301).

One intriguing motif with regards to self-representation in *Shroud* – one that can be seen as the origin narrative's title – is the Shroud of Turin which is referred to as « the first self-

portrait⁴ » (156). After a talk Axel delivers at a literary conference in Turin Kristina Kovacs, a former mistress of Axel's youth, half-ironically expresses her surprise at the fact that Axel did not mention the Shroud in his discussion regarding « effacement » (156). Here, the discussion of the Shroud can be read at two levels. On the first reading, it conjures up the idea of shrouding, that is to say, covering, concealing, or obscuring. Indeed, Axel confesses to his « shrouded past » (338) hidden behind a « borrowed [...] purloined, reputation » (64). He claims to have « manufactured a reputation » (329) « made up wholly of poses » (329). One could assume that he takes to writing this confession to achieve his « true » self behind the « façade » and « imposture » of a false name (285). Here, the idea is that there is some form of truthful coherent self which has been shrouded or masked, which, by means of a self-revelatory confessional narrative could be unearthed.

However, things prove to be yet more complicated than they seem and on a second reading of the Shroud in relation to Axel's narrative one arrives at a different interpretation. Upon Cass's insistence to visit the Shroud Axel ironically tries to convince her that it is « a fake » (307). Indeed, the authenticity of this « self-portrait » to date remains under dispute. There is much polemic that, according to some facts, it is a mere painting which might have been « fabricated » in the middle ages and not upon Christ's death/resurrection. And even if we accept that the image on the Shroud is a « real » one we cannot find solid evidence that it « truly » belongs to Christ and not someone else. Moreover, unsuccessful to visit the « real » Shroud Cass and Axel are told about « a reproduction of the Shroud » (311) being exhibited somewhere in Turin echoing a duplication of a yet another duplication of the real thing – in this case Christ's face. Things become even more ambiguous if one does not believe Christ did exist. So what one ends up with is a

⁴ The Shroud of Turin is an old cloth featuring the image of man who has apparently suffered crucifixion. The image is believed by many to be that of Jesus Christ upon his crucifixion/resurrection.

representtation of a representation without a coherently conceivable referent – a signifier, that is to say, without signified. The thing itself, Christ's face, is only present to us through a representation whose authenticity is yet far from being fully ascertained.

Similarly, our narrator steals the identity of a person called Axel Vander. In other words our narrator is not « really » Axel Vander. Ironically, towards the end of the novel it is suggested that the « real » Axel Vander was a fake himself for he forged an untruthful personal history. He was not « really » who he claimed to be either. It is hinted to the reader that he was a Jew himself, just like the nameless narrator (404). So if Axel Vander is not Axel Vander—i.e. the narrator—and if the real Vander is not who he claims to be then what does the name Axel Vander « really » and « truthfully » refer to? Just like the Shroud of Turin, it is a signifier whose signified is elusive and not easily ascertainable.

What our narrator is undergoing in his narrative is what de Man calls « defacement⁵ ». According to de Man, inasmuch as autobiography as *prosopopeia* confers a mask, it also « defaces, » that is to say, it « deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration » (DE MAN, 1984 : 76). Autobiography disfigures the figure of *prosopopeia* and defaces the face it confers, disfiguring the very mask it aims to restore. So long as language is the means of telling and giving meaning to a life, autobiography is caught up in the figurative dimension of language which simultaneously undoes this very meaning. In other words, it *defaces*. Since all language perpetually fails in its aim to bring sense and coherence to a life autobiography can never be autobiographical because it constantly « fail[s] to produce a face incapable of disfigurement » (MCQUILLAN, 2001 : 74). So at best, autobiography is really none more than a representation of

⁵ The narrator in *Shroud* refers to « Shelly's defacement » (121) which is a combination of the titles of two of de Man's articles namely « Shelly Disfigured » and « Autobiography as Defacement ».

biography rather than the thing itself. De Man's idea of « a linguistic predicament » is that insofar as language is imposed on the arbitrary production of texts by readers who take them actually to refer to something language cannot possibly posit its own meaning (MCQUILLAN, 2001 : 74). Indeed, autobiography can represent the voice and name of the subject but the result is a distorted representation of one's self and/or mind. To put it in de Man's words, it « veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause » (DE MAN, 1984 : 81).

Self-conscious of his « effacement » the narrator claims: « I pause in uncertainty, losing my way in this welter of personal, impersonal, impersonating, pronouns » (285). The result of self-representation for Axel is a myriad of faces and selves and, instead of one stable identity, he has ended up with several unstable ones. Being perpetually caught up in the « welter » of selves has left him in an undecidable feeling of uncertainty. Consequently and paradoxically, unable to tell a coherent self-story, at one point in the novel, he almost abandons writing an autobiography and, instead, calls for Cass Cleave to write a biography of him hoping to arrive at a better representation of himself (156).

3. The narrative voice

The sense of coherent self is complicated at yet another layer, namely at the level of (self-)consciousness. Indeed as deconstructionist aware of the linguistic limitation of representation Axel, like almost all of Banville's other protagonists, self-consciously alludes to the constructed nature of his narrative by metafictional references. Moreover, besides being a discourse of defacement, we learn that, for the narrator in *Shroud*, the self-reflexive mode of autobiography results not in a more coherent understanding of oneself, but rather, in a dual consciousness threatening the very sense of a unified narrating self. Insofar as the logic of autobiography entails viewing oneself, Axel finds himself prey to a « heightened sense of self-awareness » (333) which at times disturbs his very perception of

himself. He says « what made me flinch, surely, was an over-consciousness of self » (41). The self-awareness inherent in the discourse of autobiography could result in a bifurcation or split of the narrating *persona*. Axel thinks that « I could hear myself breathing in the mouthpiece, as if I were standing behind my own shoulder » (38). Elsewhere he perceives himself to be « cloven in two » (13) and he describe moments when « I had the sensation [...] of shifting slightly aside from myself, as if I were going out of focus and separating into two » (68). He also claims that « [t]here sleeps in me another self » (106) and later he is convinced that he has a doppelganger (287).

In addition, in autobiography, the author writes his or her self making it the subject of their own knowledge. This involves a form of substitution, exchanging the writing *I* for the written *I*, and therefore implies that the two persons are at least as different as they are the same (MCQUILLAN, 2001 : 79). In this regard, one is tempted to read the constant shift in narration from third person to first person and *vice versa*, as a constant sense of alienation from and an attempt at identification with the narrating *persona*.

“He drew his hand from under the bedclothes[...] 'With this *I* wrote those articles that you found,' he said [...] *He, I, I* saw again the empty bottle[...] [she] took *my* hand in both of hers and brought it to her lips and kissed it. *I.*” (193, my italics)

The subject is estranged, or in other words, separated from his « self » and is, thus, at times reduced to a narrating voice as an independent object. At first, *I* is Axel Vander (the narrator and the real person-Vander), then *I* is the narrating nameless impostor (the narrator but not the Vander) and finally the *persona I* disappears and is replaced by a third person narrator. What one observes is the effacement of the subject of narration/autobiography. It is, in other words, the effacement of the point to which the subject needs to anchor his reference in order to have a meaningful self-representation. The result is, on the hand, a representation without a fixed referent to represent

and, on the other hand, the lack of a center of intentionality, a stable self, to narrate a coherent life-story.

As Lene Yiding Pederson remarks, it is discernible that « [a]t character level and within the story-world of the novel, Vander 'is' not anyone anymore (at best he is someone else), and his writing does not guarantee an original voice » (PEDERSON, 2005 : 151). Albeit the subject as *I* is effaced but what is striking is that the narrative voice seems to go on, as if even at the cost of the narrator's effacement. There seems to be a separation between the « manufactured voice » and the constantly effaced narrating *I*. The narrator begins by taking on a face represented by the narrative voice which de Man calls *prosopopeia*. However, as he goes on the voice takes an independent role betraying him and revealing the split at the heart of his narration.

Not only is the voice separated from the subject but it can exist beyond it. Axel observes that even the dead « have their voice » (405) suggesting that somehow it can survive bodily death. In addition, we learn that what drove Cass to Axel was not really his academic writing but, rather, it was a voice: « What was that thing that spoke to her out of the things he wrote? She cared nothing for Shelly's defacement [...] what she heard was a voice calling to her, and her alone » (121). The voice seems to act as an object distinct from its bearer. On the one hand, one discerns the textual voice as *prosopopeia* manufactured in autobiographical discourse. It is a voice that confers a mask on the subject of autobiography by means of figural language. On the other hand, however, there is the voice that carries on the narration even after the « effacement » of the narrator, a voice which is independent from its very bearer, a voice which can even survive death.

This latter dimension of the voice should, I think, be read, in relation to what Axel identifies as « an enduring core »:

“I spent the best part of what I suppose I must call my career trying to drum into those who would listen among the general mob of resistant sentimentalists surrounding me the simple lesson that there is no self, no ego[...] And yet [...] For all my insistence, and to my secret shame, I admit that even I cannot entirely rid myself of the conviction of an

enduring core of selfhood amid the welter of the world, a kernel immune to any gale that might pluck the leaves from the almond tree and make the sustaining branches swing and shake.” (27)

Axel agrees with de Man that « just like history, identity is textual » (PEDERSON, 2005 : 151) and indeed, as a post-structuralist, he must fail at finding a « true » self behind an illusory face/mask. Yet, he comes upon a dimension which seems to be beyond language. What the reader encounters after the deconstructive « gale » of self-excavation is a « core of selfhood » that remains « immune » to language games, a « kernel » that exists – or rather *insists* – beyond all masquerade⁶. There seems to be a relation between the nameless something and the nameless voice mentioned earlier for they both belong to a dimension beyond the signifier. A detour through Mladen Dolar’s understanding of « the dichotomy of voice and *logos* » will hopefully clarify this relation (DOLAR, 2006 : 43).

4. The voice as a partial object

Dolar argues, following Jacques Lacan, that the voice « seems to present a counterweight to differentiability » because it involves « a non-signifying remainder resistant to the signifying operations » (DOLAR, 2006 : 36). Initially, it functions as the sort of carrier by which the word – i.e. the signifier – takes the form of an audible sign and becomes transferred between the subject and the other. However, after the signifier is carried to the other through the voice, the process leaves a trace, a surplus, added to the signification process. In other words, the transference of signifiers produces a leftover which cannot be articulated by those very signifiers. It is a « something » which uncannily persists beyond signification.

Moreover, « the voice appears as the link which ties the signifier to the body » (DOLAR, 2006 : 59). It functions as a means

⁶ There is a similar scenario in Frantz Kafka’s short story « The Judgment » where the narrative voice continues in the third person after the first person narrator, George Bendemann, dies (KAFKA, 1995).

by which language « ties with » the corporeality of the human body. However, says Dolar, « the nature of this tie is paradoxical: the voice does not belong to either » (DOLAR, 2006 : 72). It can be viewed as « a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source [...] yet remains corporeal » (DOLAR, 2006 : 73). It functions as a detached object that is simultaneously, and paradoxically, inside and outside body and language. No wonder, then, Axel observes that the voice outlives its bearer (405).

Conclusion

Read in relation to what Axel calls the « enduring core » the ongoing voice demonstrates an intriguing dimension of Banville's aesthetics in his fiction. Ultimately, for Axel, what « goes on » – to borrow Samuel Beckett's words – is the narrative voice (Beckett, 1955 : 414). Despite the lack of a coherent self, and despite admitting to the illusory nature of autonomous subjectivity, Axel feels the urge to continue his narrative. Based on this reading, one can formulate an ethics which permeate *Shroud*, an ethics reminiscent of the Beckettian imperative: writing « must go on ».

To conclude, as I hope to have demonstrated, in *Shroud*, Banville starts by exploring de Man's idea of autobiography as defacement/effacement featuring Axel – the « unreal » Axel, the narrator – constantly being unmasked and effaced. His starting point is to read « de Man like de Man reads Shelly » (PEDERSON, 2005 : 141). I claim, however, in the process of his effacement Axel touches a minimal form of what might be called « truth ». That is to say, he realizes that there is a « core » that exists despite not being « real » it nonetheless persists in endurance ; it is *real* in Jacques Lacan's sense of the term. an irreducible dimension beyond the empty *I* shifter. This is arguably where Banville distances himself from de Man and moves to a subject of narration which resonates the Lacanian subject embodied by the nameless narrative voice as a separate object that defies Axel's deconstructionist tradition. In other words, Banville, like Lacan, retains a category of the subject and returns to the cogito,

but the cogito as a void represented at times by a partial object without stable subjectivity. Rather, it is a subject as locus, an empty name which nonetheless heroically persists in narration.

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