

THE POET IN A CHANGING WORLD

(Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* as a point
of reference in comparing
Eliot's *Gerontion* and
Stevens' *The Man with the Blue Guitar*)

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"The poet's crucial role in his culture [is] to preserve and make possible of realization the idea of Man as a simple, separate person, an authentic self."¹ But the man who sees himself locked in time and fears the changes he observes both in himself and in the world feels his identity threatened. The *carpe diem* strain of lyric poetry is but one response to this threat, a phrase interpreted by many Romantic poets as suggesting a "seizure" of the feeling rather than of the day. Nineteenth century poets often seem to have ignored the threat and circumscribed a safe world of jingling platitudes. Whitman apparently observed the wilting and sensitive Self revealed in such poems of his predecessors and contemporaries and sought a new expression, a song of the robust Self.

Instead of lamenting the world or reducing it to an imagined blossom or fluttering sentiment, Whitman faced and embraced the whole universe; he discarded poetic diction in favor of robust speech; he brought the world into his poem so that world and poem became one. Yet the self embracing the world

¹Roy Harvey Pearce, "On the Continuity of American Poetry,"
Hudson Review X (Winter 1957-58), p. 538

and the whole of creation, past and present and future, becomes involved in a paradox. As "an acme of things accomplished and an encloser of things to be" (*Song of Myself*, 44) Whitman is simultaneously both participant in the changing world and its creator. Indistinguishable from the very cycle of life itself he destroys the contradictions essential to dialectic.

Stevens in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and Eliot in *Gerontion* offer contrasting views of the relation of the poet to his world, in terms different from Whitman's. Eliot bears some resemblance to Whitman in considering the self in time, and in being aware of meaning; while Stevens rejects or ignores both time ("It must change") and meaning ("It must be abstract") in favor of imagination. Yet Stevens' imagination provides ways of looking at the world that are closer to Whitman's positive approach than to the negative way of *Gerontion*. Beneath the surface of his poem, however, Stevens makes suggestions that show a number of points comparable with Eliot's. O'Connor states the case too strongly when he says

Stevens and Eliot are comparable only in terms of their skill. Their idioms, themes and major interests are sufficiently dissimilar to discourage any explicit comparisons.²

But Stevens emphasizes the imagination and views reality from many angles of perception, continually changing his way of looking at the world, while Eliot stresses the mind, memories caught up in a frightening conception of reality. One writes the poetry of changing perception, the other of conception. It is important to understand this distinction of purpose in analyzing their presentation of poetic arguments.

²William Van O'Connor. *The Shaping Spirit* (Chicago; Henry Regnery Company, 1950).

Naturally, each is to some extent confined by the limitations of his artistic medium. The poet creates with words, manipulating their connotations and denotations, their rhythmic possibilities; he must use these words in expressing his relationship to the world and in trying to formulate whatever meanings he believes it holds. Our understanding of the way in which the poet handles his material, of what he is attempting in a particular poem, may be further colored by his prose statements concerning his intention. For instance, Whitman speaks of "The United States themselves" as essentially the greatest poem; Eliot wants something "behind" or "beyond" a poem; and Stevens in *The Necessary Angel* (p. 27) writes "Poetry is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals."

Such prose clarification often amounts (as in Whitman's "O'er Travelled Roads") to hindsight by which the poet camouflages his changing poetics. Yet we cannot entirely ignore such statements; nor can we quite forget the ways in which the three poems to be discussed differ from or resemble the rest of each poet's work. We find that an understanding of the poet's attitude to his world is essential to a proper understanding of his poetic presentation of that world.

The problem of "change" is one aspect of the fundamental epistemological problem of appearance and reality. Basically this is a philosophical or scientific question which might appear irrelevant to a discussion of poetry. Yet the familiar aspects of change, the daily awareness of the changing appearance of aging man or ripening fruit, of shifts of light or color, of changing weather, attitudes, and styles inevitably interest even the least imaginative man. The poet, whether he is preoccupied with recording "things as they are" (an impossible task, since one cannot put the actual tree or bird on paper) or with analyzing the "meaning of things," cannot ignore change. And his attitude towards the changing aspects of his world will inevi-

tably have important effects on his poetry.

The essential dialectical tension between the self and the (changing) world is stretched to the breaking point in *Gerontion*, yet that "something beyond" of which Eliot has spoken gives a resilience to his words that prevents a complete break. We may suspect that here, as in East Coker II, Eliot is aware of "...the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings" and that he knows the inherent danger ("...words strain/Crack and sometimes break under the burden," *Burnt Norton* IV). Eliot shows himself more aware of the limitations of expression in comparison with Stevens' variations (which are attempts to pin down reality, like the thought on the door). Stevens' attitude ultimately collapses, as does Whitman's, in prophecy. If the self is assumed to be self-sufficient the tension between the desire to capture reality and the growing awareness that this is impossible cannot be withstood. Even the most elastic imagination finally snaps; the spinning self is unable to focus on any of the thousand aspects of reality. This phase of Stevens' later poetry bears some resemblance to Whitman's prophetic phase, but in Whitman's case the tension was destroyed not by too many views but by the limitation to one. What tension can there be in the pressure of of one whose foothold is "tenon'd and mortis'd in granite" ?

Whitman sees time and chage as one -- his poetry embraces all that he sees, all that has been, all that will be; he laughs at "what you call dissolution" (20). He asks almost casually, "What does Eternity indicate?" (for Whitman, it is a rhetorical question). He writes of everything, he identifies with all. At first (1855) there is a sense of compromise: "One time is as good as another time" (23); but this later becomes: "I accept time absolutely." Later poems suggest that the poet goes beyond mere acceptance; he conquers time.

Whitman and Stevens are more interested in "now" than in

history, but while Stevens often seems to escape from time to the imagination, Whitman inserts himself into the cycle of history. Unlike Eliot, who feels that the universe is the stronger force, Whitman himself makes history, forcing his Ego upon the world, merging self and universal Ego. Yet his grandiose historical statements, even when tied to specific battles (e.g., The Alamo), fail to produce Gerontion's tense awareness. Caught in a web of memories, Gerontion's depressing view of the changed and changing world yet sweeps the whole of history, from the "hot gates" of Thermopylae to the whirling out into chaos of "fractured atoms" of humanity (their humanity stressed by their names). There is a hint of Eliot's later awareness of the aging individual as only a part of the pattern of some larger design in Gerontion's movement from history's "cunning corridors" to his realization that *we* do not end when the individual "I" (stressed by its isolation at the end of Eliot's line) stiffens "in a rented house."

We look at Gerontion -- old, unseeing, tortured by memory -- we see the self overwhelmed by the world. Although Gerontion says, "Here I am . . .," he cannot determine the meaning of his position. Eliot suggests the powerlessness of the individual, his virtual insignificance in temporal reality (in contrast to the overwhelming, all-embracing Ego of Whitman's verse). The old man provides an individual human perspective in spite of his position as *an* old man overwhelmed by a realization of *the jew, the woman, the word, the tiger . . .* and of the perversions of (*named*) Hakagawa and Silvero and of the destiny of the (*named*) atoms in space. Weak, uncertain, tortured by "a thousand *small* deliberations," terribly aware of time, Gerontion is hemmed in by images of decay: "coughing" goat, "depraved" May, "weak" hands, and "unnatural vices."

In contrast, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* in spite of positive assertions about the world fails to present an individual

either suffering (like Gerontion) or celebrating (like Whitman). Only the imagination is active. Perhaps "imagination" equals "man," and that suggests why the guitarist seems as selfconfident as Whitman. He "knows" that he is "a native of this world" (xxviii); yet unlike Whitman he admits limitations

Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar (i)

Such limitation is later resolved:

Things are as I think they are

And say they are on the blue guitar (xxviii)

The guitarist's self, unlike Gerontion's, can impose some order on the world. But self merges with imagination. Thus Stevens resembles Eliot in realizing the possibilities of struggle; but he is not devoured by the Christ-tiger. Instead, he will "reduce the monster to myself," and he will be himself "in face of the monster" (xix). As he reassured the flagging self by asserting that which

momentously declares

Itself not to be I and yet

Must be. (xii)

so he also questions Picasso's distortion: "Do I sit, deformed ...?" The phrases describing Picasso's painting ("this hoard of destructions" and "Is my thought a memory, not alive?") sound suspiciously like a denial of Gerontion's position. If *The Comedian as the Letter C* is Stevens' answer to *The Waste Land*, then *The Man with the Blue Guitar* suggests Stevens' response to *Gerontion*.

The poem is awarded a role as participant in reality; it "gives in the universal intercourse" (xxii). This is a dream in which the individual can believe, in face of the object (xviii), a song in place of "empty heaven." Gerontion's heaven is empty too, except for fractured atoms of humanity, but he has found no substitute in his struggle for understanding; Eliot, of course,

later discovered heaven in his own way. In Gerontion's world, all is confusion, a perversion of the sacrament and a reversal of roles, in which "Christ the tiger devours us." Whitman's *Song* makes no such attempt at understanding.

I hear and behold God in every object, yet
understand God not in the least (48)

In such a view, the blue guitar would be an encumbrance, a barrier between self and world. His *Song* is not a hymn to replace empty heaven but one to encompass and partake of heaven itself.

Eliot and Stevens are like Whitman in that they use the rhythms of speech as opposed to traditional metrics. But neither uses Whitman's "barbaric yawp," his poetics of persuasion (the latter ranging from an early role as salesman of the uninhibited life to a later stance as prophet of the new Jerusalem). Eliot speaks through the doubting, halting memory of Gerontion, in unanswered questions, fragments, distorted syntax. Stevens plays the guitarist's tunes, sometimes gay, always ironic, with a combination of jangling insistent couplets and ambiguous qualifications, as well as the discords resulting from the simultaneous use of "grand" words and prosaic ones (discussed in more detail below).

Whitman sings a remarkably persuasive *Song*, apparently naive but really utilizing all the tricks of rhetoric, the shrewd approach of the professional talker. He celebrates and sings "myself" (1), he stresses the personal pronoun (as *Gerontion* does initially) but this is no private meditation. He exhorts the reader to share his view, to participate in it; he is going to impose his outlook on ours in spite of his promise:

You shall no longer take things at second or third
hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor
feed on spectres in books.

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor

take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from
yourself (2)

Actually, there is no such freedom, as he later admits

I... would fetch you ... flush with myself (42)

The freedom of action in the command to travel the road "for yourself" is simply more rhetoric.

Similarly, he uses the orator's or salesman's favorite device: denial of all possible objections before he makes his "pitch." He cries "There was never ... Nor any more ... will never be ..."; he offers apparently logical support, "learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so" (in which "feel" is an obvious contradiction in terms). But this carefree fellow who "loafes" with hand on hip should not deceive us with his disarming disguise. The carefree song of union and brotherhood, the shy uncertainties of "It seems ... I guess ... It may be ..." and the conspiratorial "What do you think?" are but this fellow's preparation for Winning the Audience. All the time he appears to be "Putting it at random in these songs" (*Our Old Feuillage*) he is approaching that moment "To be indeed a God" (*A Song of Joys*).

He is sure that "All goes onward and outward ... and nothing collapses" -- a self-confidence very different from the whirling atoms of *Gerontion* and from both the hesitant "I patch it as I can" (ii) and the self-assuring banging "from a savage blue" (iii) of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. Whitman never rests: he continues his convincing catalogues "And I know ... And I know ... And that ... And that ...," scarcely pausing to ask "Has any one supposed ...?" before intruding the answer: "I know." Line after line forces, through definite article, exclatory "what" (8); the imposing self is everywhere, gathering all (but "Who need to, be afraid of [this] merge?"); he can "never be shaken away." In barn, mountain, ship, Far West; by the shore; seeing, touching, going with every individual; partaking

of all aspects of life equally -- the poet insists that his thoughts are those of "all men in all ages and lands" (17). We are exhausted by his "thousand clear cornets and scream of the octave flute" (18:1855), by participation in his perpetual "flow." His exhortations brook no denial: Smile! Press Close!

The way in which Whitman establishes his position changes little throughout the stanzas of *Song of Myself*. There is no "change" in the accepted sense of the word; for "here or henceforward it is all the same to me" (23) and even the dirt is "receding before my prophetic screams..." (25) All is present, Behaving ... Depriving ... Unbuttoning ... Deluding (28). All is in flux: "To be in any form, what is that?" -- "I have instant conductors ... They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me" (27). "Myself moving forward then and now and forever" (32). "I visit...I fly...I help...I anchor... I go...I ascend...All this I swallow...it becomes mine..." (33). "Ever...Ever...Ever...Ever..." (42). Even "the whirling is elemental within me" in the 1855 edition -- a whirling bearing no resemblance to Gerontion's whirling, to man as "white feathers in the snow." Time itself is dissolved: "The past and present wilt...I...proceed to fill my next fold of the future" (51).

Neither Stevens nor Eliot reveals any trace of this sort of "thinking." Time is the cause of depravity and decay in *Gerontion*; old age is a terrible time of "dry brain." (Whitman glorifies even age: "Old age superbly rising! Ineffable grace of dying days" (45) and "It is idle for death to try to alarm me" (49).) While Stevens' time is confined to "its final block" (xxxiii) or dismissed to "the belly's dark/Of time" where it "grows upon the rock" (xi), it never appears either as the cycle of history, or as

Eternity lies in bottomless reservoirs...its buckets
are rising forever and ever (44:1855)

Stevens uses the imagination in facing the universe, he forms an image within the form of the guitar. But he lacks the power of Whitman, who is served by the forces of the universe: "Cycles ferried my cradle... All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me..." (44).

Closer analysis of *Gerontion* yields few signs of Whitman's poetics. The opening "Here I am..." leads to no positive assertions, only to doubts, memories, recollections of sensual pleasure. And all is felt with the intensity of a man who cannot bear his knowledge; there is an intolerable tension between the frustrated self and the powerful forces outside. Unlike the guitarist who offers a consoling tune, who perhaps recognizes the difficulties but is determined to "make the best of a bad job," *Gerontion* has nothing. His horror is communicated through words twisted into harsh rhythms and awkward syntax, "...heaving a cutlass/Bitten by flies, fought." The lines opening the first stanza begin with words that stress his position (Here, Being, I) only to be followed by negatives (Nor fought... Nor knee deep...) and by words establishing his weakness, his passivity (Bitten... Spawned... Blistered). Unlike the man with the guitar who has his own system of song and music, his own way of figuring reality, *Gerontion* goes ever downward to new horrors. Agonies for Whitman were but "one of my changes of garment" (33); for *Gerontion*, they are life itself.

Decayed house, dull head, lost senses which can no longer be used "for your closer contact" -- it is a picture of despair. The cry for a sign is ironically answered with the word, Christ, but a word as yet without speech, swaddled in darkness. Stevens does not rail after "the rotted names"; he rejects them, and makes his own solution. In this respect Stevens is closer to Whitman, who found in himself the "word unsaid/It is not in any dictionary or utterance or symbol" (50)

The only sign observed by *Gerontion* is a promise of be-

trayal -- depraved May reveals that the sacrifice of Christ the tiger was in vain, his worship perverted, the sacrament mocked in images of wandering hands, shifting (sacramental) candles and bowing to paintings instead of God. These horrors add to the loss of Gerontion's identity: "An old man in a draughty house" is no longer related to "I am." The knowledge of decay of self (rather than the decay of sign or knowledge³), of the self old and alone "under a windy knob" includes no "forgiveness" no divine promise. Unlike the guitarist, Gerontion has neither imagination nor strength; he can bang out no song of consolation.

Cunning passages of history and vanities of time (reminiscent of the *carpe diem* lyrics, but with richer implications) relate to the "supple confusions." Eliot repeats "giving" in order to emphasize that nothing is received.

Gives too late

What's not believed in ...

Gives too soon

Into weak hands ...

Neither fear nor courage saves; vices are an accident of heroism; virtues are an accident of our "impudent crimes."

The position of the reader is subtly changed. Without the assertive imagination of Stevens, without the assertive Ego of Whitman, Eliot has drawn us into Gerontion's question. Nothing saves *us*: we find this is *our* heroism, these are *our* crimes. From the tension of a dramatic situation, Gerontion's, we move to an awareness that the rain we waited for is as yet only the tears of knowledge, of "the wrath-bearing tree." The tiger devours *us*, though we think we are devouring the body and blood of the tiger. Yet *we* have not reached conclusion when *I* (the

³Suggested in George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1960) p. 110

individual self) stiffens; Gerontion dies, the world goes on. In this hint of distinction between his own end and the world's Gerontion moves from the egocentric view (a different form of that malady than Whitman's or Stevens') to the universal. His life was not without purpose; he would be honest. And this is a more convincing assertion than Whitman's deceptive confidences (he had "some intricate purpose"; he "might not tell everybody but will tell you", 19).

This opens up the possibility of Gerontion's not needing his "passion" any more: the time of the senses is past, he could not enjoy "closer contact." The personal tragedy of the opening "Here I am... Being read to by a boy..." is viewed in clearer perspective. Memories serve only to "excite the membrane"; they provide a wilderness of (deceptive) mirrors; the world goes on beyond the mind. Spider and weevil will presumably continue their inevitable, necessary labors without worrying about one man's decay. As powerless as gull in wind, as feather in snow, the old man is forced by the winds "To a sleepy corner." This carries us back to the epigraph, recalling

Thou hast nor youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both

Gerontion's memories are but a dream -- his dream, our dreams, thoughts of a dry brain. But his dream, unlike Stevens' imaginative construction (something "in which I can believe" - xviii) perhaps offers a hint of Eliot's later view of memory:

This is the use of memory:
For liberation... (Little Gidding III)

Eliot does not attempt to terminate dreams, as Whitman does,
Long enough have you dream'd...

Now I wash the gum from your eyes (Song, 46)

Nor does he follow Stevens in constructing a dream, a world
"washed in his imagination" (*Man*, xxvi)

The Man with the Blue Guitar offers a dialogue between the musician (imaginative man or poet) and those who simultaneously accuse him, "You do not play things as they are," and make demands upon him, "But play you must,/A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (i). Stevens does not attempt to provide what Whitman referred to as "a bridge between reality and their souls,"⁴ at least in this poem. On the contrary, his first response is merely that he does his best: "I patch it as I can" (i). The guitarist-poet acknowledges the impossibility of capturing "things as they are," but he is not defeated. He shows that change is part of the nature of things, the effect of blue guitar on green reality. In so doing, he snaps the tension between self and world and offers a discipline that reinterprets the world imaginatively.

The changes here are not so much of place, of relative position, as they were in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." There are some suggestions of change beyond the perception; but Stevens has not yet moved all the way to the (philosophical) consideration of changing concept. Still he says "nothing changed except the place" (vi) in the time-free imagination (the opposite of Eliot's time-bound memory). Yet there are in this poem hints of thoughts beyond the surface. The apparent force, which seems so different from Gerontion's weakness, is perhaps related to the poet's view of an unsatisfactory world.

The imaginative view makes a world "not quite round" (ii), and picks out the "acid colors" of a man, nailing his thought "across the door" (iii). But it must be "this rhapsody or none" (xxxix), whereas Whitman's *Song* is presented as *the* rhapsody (no alternatives admitted!). In contrast to Whitman's seeing, dancing, laughing, singing, the guitarist's tune is not a paean to Self but a help for the self. The assertion that things are "as I think they are" and "as I say they are" (xxviii) nec-

⁴Preface to 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass, Complete Poetry*, p. 574

ssitates several dialectical maneuvers. He must reject the lean Review (xxix), the lights, definitions and rotted "names" (xxxii). He has to question himself; to offer doubts, "Not to be part of the sun?" (vii); a regretful note is heard, "...corrupting pallors" followed by a pause (...) and "ay di mi." Yet these are not as effective as Whitman's rhetorical gymnastics. "Poetry is the subject of the poem" (xxii); but the guitarist has to dispose of more doubts before he can observe that the blue guitar surprises, in playing "you as you are" reveals that "You are yourself." Unlike Whitman's Self, the guitarist's imagination leads to hesitancy even as he asserts.

Sometimes the source of the questions in the poem is ambiguous; always there is a note of irony. The poet questions his own song; "So that's life then?" (iv). As he twangs out a tune of rhymed couplets an unrhymed suggestion breaks in:

The feelings crazily, craftily call

Like the buzzing of flies in autumn air (iv)

Again and again grand idea is reduced to prosaic statement. Things as they are. *Or so we say* (xxii). "Beauty" becomes the "hooing of slick trombones" followed by stressed repeated "a petty misery" (x); "apostrophizing wreaths" are reduced to "grunted breath" (xxiii). With an artful arrangement of words Stevens stresses "It is" in a tone of Whitmanian self-confidence, only to conclude with the shock of "An animal" (xvii). And Oxidia, banal suburb ("one half of its installments paid") is paired with Olympia (xxx).

The effect of so many inevitable contrasts, of the never-ending surprise, is a slackening of tension. It is easier to cease stretching after the guitarist's meaning, to listen for melody, chords, discords. Yet there *is* a serious vein implicit in the very descriptions of the guitarist's tune (poem), of the way in which "things as they are" are changed. Is the musician's irony directed towards himself or towards the world when he speaks

of "pale intrusions into blue" (xiii), of shadows where he plays (xiv), of the "poor pale guitar" (xx). The self-assured Whitmanian declaration, "...all/Confusion solved" is followed by the apparently self-deprecatory "One keeps on playing year by year" (xxiii). There may be a hint that the guitarist, like Gerontion, is frightened; we are not sure whether he is reassuring the audience or himself. Again, there are hints of deception in the trickery of one who holds the world upon his nose, reducing it to the "ai-yi-yi" beaten out by "a fat thumb." (xxv)

Each proposition, from "man number one" to "a million people" is trimmed down to the size of a blue guitar. Life, the greatness of poetry, a tune beyond us, the sun, the vivid floral sky -- all goes through the imagination. There is a composing of senses on the guitar, dependent on its cold strings, finally "twanged" out and left there. The guitar is "the place of things as they are," Even concepts, e.g., men in waves becoming the sea (reminiscent of Whitman's flux), are continually contradicted: "The sea returns upon the men." And we find that "it is the chord that falsifies."

Yet unlike the lonely *Gerontion*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* insists on being "a native of this world." In this he resembles Whitman, although Whitman becomes gradually more world-shaper than world-citizen. Realistically aware that he can only reach "almost to man" (ii) he still declares,

From this I shall evolve a man (xxx)

And all his playful tune of tick and tock, his ironic twists, his artful comparisons lead up to a final statement of the stone (the earth, the real world) as the place where poet -- and man -- must inevitably rest. By day we shall forget, we shall not suffer Gerontion's tortured memory. Our memory will be only of the imaginative moment, the imagined pine and jay.

Strangely, there are more opportunities for realization of "an authentic self" (see page 16, above) in the sufferings of *Ge-*

rontion than in the exuberant *Song of Myself* or in the playful juxtapositions of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. This is perhaps part of the quality that we value in Eliot's poetry. Thought, which he has described as the framework of ideas behind a poem, even when it is merely "thoughts of a dry brain" can be brought to life, given new form. In contrast, Stevens' imagination and Whitman's Self tend to exhaust poetic possibility, to seem superficial or shallow.

Gerontion is also better oriented (though rather depressingly) in its view of an actual world, whereas both the *Song* and the *Guitar* tend to build up intensely personal worlds. Eliot's *Gerontion* faces the horrors of his world, while the other poems evade it. Whitman "accepts Reality" and we tend to be fooled by his insistently optimistic tone, so that we miss the rest of the line, the implications of "and dare not question it." Whitman shouts his power and his masculinity to cover his fears; Stevens sings a mocking song.

Stevens tends to carry us round and round an ever changing object while Whitman smothers and only Eliot analyzes. We might argue that analysis is not the proper "subject" of poetry; but it provides richer poetry than mere participation (Whitman), without excluding imagination (Stevens). By his separation of self from world Eliot maintains an exciting tension that is sadly lacking in Whitman's *Song* (where world and self and poem all meet in the inclusive Ego). *Gerontion*, the poem of despair, stands revealed as containing the poetics of promise.

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