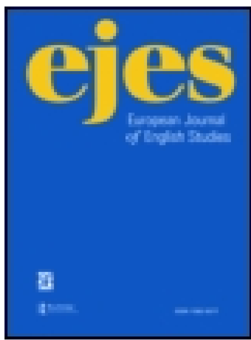

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Rosemarie Buikema

LITERATURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF AMBIGUOUS MEMORY

Confession and double thoughts in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

One year after the massive, five-volume Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report *appeared in 1998, we indisputably witness in Coetzee's* Disgrace, *by way of the account of professor David Lurie's downfall, the upheaval of a country in transition. The representation of this upheaval, however, drew considerable attention nationally and internationally and sparked a still ongoing debate on what Coetzee was trying to say about the life and times of post-apartheid South Africa. In this essay it is argued that an interpretation that allows itself to be guided too much by an allegorical meaning of* Disgrace*'s mirror plot and that is too quick to accept the referentiality of a post-apartheid South Africa screaming for future images, ignores important if not essential plot lines and intertextual echoes. The powers of imagination, as masterfully deployed by J. M. Coetzee, make the role of literature in the production of cultural memory both monumentalising and ambiguous.*

Keywords cultural memory; J. M. Coetzee; *Disgrace*; Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Mahmud Mamdami; Wole Soyinka

> When she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero.
>
> (Toni Morrison, *The Song of Solomon*, 1989: 149)

Introduction

By staging the testimonies of victims and the confessions of perpetrators, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has brought individual memories into the public domain with the intention of leading the nation away from its divided past. Since the abolition of the dictatorial apartheid regime, no all-encompassing discourse has been available regarding the nation's past. Different perspectives are doing the rounds and, so it seems, are irreconcilable differences of opinion.

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In the knowledge that a great deal of facts and information regarding South Africa's tainted history has been lost – wantonly or otherwise – the only thing remaining is to initiate a dialogue between perpetrators and victims in the hope of achieving a community-building process of truth-finding, understanding and forgiveness. The fact that some of the perpetrators are themselves victims complicates matters. In particular, the uniform condemnation of white and black violence in the final report drafted by the commission has led to severe criticism among black communities of the commission's efforts (see, for example, James and van de Vijver, 2001). Black violence should be judged by different standards, it is argued, because it was based on different motives and in a different context.

The truth that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was searching for has mainly yielded the insight that those racially, but especially politically different positions regarding the past should be unified in a collective identity in some way or another, not only by propagating new images, such as Bishop Tutu's ideal of a rainbow nation, but especially by developing a new historical consciousness. In South Africa, and beyond, the commission's efforts have thus resulted in a large number of reflections on the process of memory making and community building (Minow, 1998; Soyinka, 1999; James and van de Vijver, 2001). If cultural memory is the process which links a culture's past to its present and future in order to be able to imagine an identifiable community – and most authors in the growing field of cultural memory seem to agree that this is essentially what the term cultural memory is meant to signify (Assmann, 1997; C. Coetzee and Nuttall, 1998; Bal, 1999; Rigney, 2004) – then the South African Truth and Reconciliation process is a perfect case for contemplating the possibilities and limitations, if not the ethics, of its workings in a globalising, post-colonial world. Unlike the writing of history, the production of cultural memory is motivated by the orchestration of discontinuity and irreconcilable differences (see also Assmann, 1997: 32). From that perspective, the question of *how* the past, present and future can be linked to each other becomes of essential and constituent importance.

In my essay I will argue that this question – how to think and talk about a new South Africa in the light of its fragmented past and its complex and violent present – is exactly the subject which J. M. Coetzee investigates in his novel *Disgrace* (which won the Booker Prize). It will become clear that the relationship between literature and cultural memory is more complex than the mere conceptualisation of private stories as allegories of public events. To start with, the importance of literature for cultural memory lies not only in the way a literary work informs the reader about a historical context, but certainly also in what it generates as a literary event. The latter is certainly true about the content and the date of publication of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

One year after *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* appeared, we indisputably witness in *Disgrace*, by way of the account of professor David Lurie's downfall, the upheaval of a country in transition. The representation of this upheaval, however, drew considerable attention nationally and internationally and sparked a still ongoing debate on what Coetzee was trying to say about the life and times of post-apartheid South Africa. What was striking about this debate was the clear-cut difference between black and white readings. The penetrating images of black violence were characterised by black readers and critics as unproductive and stereotypical, and the way in which the white Lucy accepts her historical colonial guilt

was seen by white South Africans as too fatalistic (see also Krog, unpublished manuscirpt). Feminist readers, finally, were disturbed by the affirmation of passivity and femininity. 'Is reconciliation with a history of violence possible if the woman – the white Lucy, or indeed the black wife of Petrus – is as ever biting her lip?', wonders Elleke Boehmer (2002: 350). I, for my part, will read Coetzee's novel with those criticisms in mind, arguing that Coetzee tries to overcome an all-too-evident conflation of the novel's events with the reality of contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa. Whatever it is about at the referent level, Coetzee's literature always concerns the production of a layered process of consciousness or awareness. Therefore, as I aim to show, *Disgrace* remains deeply conciliatory, even if its message is not pleasant.

Lurie's trial

'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well', reads the opening line of the book, and at the same time this observation generates the prelude to a chain of disasters. Lurie is a professor of modern languages, a Byron expert, but, due to limited student interest in his subject, he is forced to teach Communications – a subject for which he has the deepest contempt, like most professors of modern languages, if only because of the unambiguous premise upon which the discipline's importance is based. *Communications 101*, the handbook Lurie uses to teach, argues: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other' (Coetzee, 1999: 3–4). In a country with eleven official languages, this is indeed a fairly simplistic assertion. A conception of language such as this is even more absurd in the context of the pressure being put on communication and the sharing of experiences in the process of truth-finding and reconciliation, a process that is never brought up throughout the entire book and yet, as did not go unnoticed in its reception, is actually also emphatically present. Despite the fact that Coetzee expressed his desire, in an essay about Nadine Gordimer, to be liberated one day from a history and a literature in which every moral problem immediately has political and ideological connotations (Coetzee, 2001a: 268), David Lurie's minor history can hardly be read in any other way than as a commentary on that gigantic political-historical process as well.

Lurie's well-organised sex life already falls to pieces in the first chapter when the prostitute he is seeing no longer wishes to receive him. Subsequently, his eye is caught by Melanie Isaacs, a student attending the only Byron class he is still allowed to teach. Lurie seduces her, and Melanie experiences his advances without much pleasure but also without much resistance. The affair ends in disaster for Lurie when Melanie's boyfriend takes the matter up with the office of Student Affairs. Lurie is suspended but is given the opportunity to exonerate himself before the committee of inquiry, which consists of representatives of the university community. The committee's aims turn out to be ambiguous. The male colleagues try to convince Lurie to extend his apologies, promise to change for the better, possibly agree to undergo therapy; in short, they attempt to sweep the affair under the carpet so that Lurie can reassume his position after a brief time-out. The female colleagues want Lurie to realise exactly what he has done and how his deed is connected to his position of power as

a professor. He must show remorse, and that remorse has to be genuine. Lurie, on the other hand, says: 'I am guilty!', which results in an extremely complicated situation. The commission becomes confused. Does he have any idea what he's saying? We want to give you an opportunity to state your position (p. 49). It is not a confession of guilt that is at stake, it is the well-intended recognition of his wrongdoing.

'I am guilty of the charges brought against me' (p. 54), Lurie repeats. In other words, he refuses amnesty, forgiveness and exoneration of responsibility for his deeds. He does not cooperate in proceedings in which he is summoned by people who, for reasons of power politics, have a stake in his atonement and who, moreover, are not the ones who can alleviate him of his guilt. The conception of language of *Communications 101*, in which language functions as a means of exchange – give me your words and I will seal your fate – has little effect here. If Lurie was not even sure himself what compelled his actions ('I became a servant of Eros' (p. 52)), how can his colleagues then be considered capable of passing judgement on his behaviour and his motives? Language, Lurie seems to be saying, allows him to confess guilt and accept the consequences of his deeds, but not to reveal his deepest motives in an unambiguous way, and also not to express remorse.

Confession and its discontents

As was mentioned earlier, it is difficult not to read this long opening scene as a commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and on the debate that was being conducted about this process in South African society, and that is still ongoing. Which truth, based on the endless series of moving testimonies and incriminating confessions, will go down in history, what should be forgiven and, more importantly, who must and can forgive whom? The victims' stories raise very different theoretical and ethical problems than those of the perpetrators. In the case of the victims, every attempt at articulating the trauma affords an image – incomplete and fragmented, but an image nevertheless – of the unnameable injustice and the bloodcurdling humiliations that the black population had to endure during the apartheid period. That must be known, never forgotten and become part of the nation's cultural memory.[1] What is much more problematic for the truth-finding is the status of the perpetrators' stories. Perpetrators could tell their story in front of a special committee and receive amnesty, providing they could demonstrate that their crimes were the result of political and not racial motives, a distinction that in itself already gave rise to a huge debate (see James and van de Vijver, 2001). The Amnesty Committee was established after the main commission and focused on perpetrators. The Committee's decisions were binding for both the TRC and the government.

In David Lurie's contrary attitude – a man who does not want to confess in order to receive forgiveness – Coetzee seems to be joining ranks with Africa expert and Nobel Prizewinner Wole Soyinka. In a long essay devoted to the TRC in *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (1999), he remarks:

> This risk-free parade of villains, calmly – and occasionally with ill-concealed relish – recounting their roles in kidnappings, tortures, murders, and mutilation,

> at the end of which absolution is granted without penalty or forfeit, is either a lesson in human ennoblement, or a glorification of impunity.
>
> (Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 1999: 28–9)

The exchange – you tell your story and I will grant you forgiveness – can lead to absolute impunity. Moreover, Mahmood Mamdani (2001) points out that aside from the explicit culprits, the acknowledged perpetrators of racial and political crimes, an entire group of so-called beneficiaries was also involved in the hearings, people who more or less consciously profited from the apartheid regime, enforcing rules without any sense of personal responsibility, and who were not asking for forgiveness since their actions were legal at the time. In Mamdani's words: 'Not only did they see no need to be forgiven, they actually experienced forgiveness as humiliation' (Mamdani, 2001: 60). The unsolicited public forgiveness, in turn, stirs bad blood with the victims and feeds the call for justice. The effect of the TRC is, according to Mamdani, that 'it ends up fuelling the very demand it set out to displace: justice!' (Mamdani, 2001: 61).

If we wanted to manoeuvre Lurie into one of these recognisable positions, then he would be a beneficiary for the male members of the committee and a perpetrator for the female members. In other words, the boundaries of perpetration are fluid and belong to the eye of the beholder. But we would be doing both Coetzee and the potency of the process of cultural memory an injustice if, in our reading of *Disgrace*, we were to leave it at this acknowledgement of identifiable ethical-political issues and intertextual echoes.[2] From Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* (1974) on, long before one could dream of a TRC in South Africa, topics like the self's presence to the self and the impossibility of genuine self-examination have played a major role in his work and his thinking (see, for example, Attwell, 1993). This preoccupation culminated in Coetzee's long essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts' in 1985 (see Coetzee, 1992). In this essay Coetzee tries to get away from microenvironments, as he explains in an interview with David Attwell, and takes on what he himself calls, 'broader critical themes' (Attwell, 1993: 243). Those broader critical themes concern the criticism of every endeavour to realise truth by means of confession and self-examination. In a discussion of the confessions of Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky, Coetzee reaches the progressive insight that every confession goes paired with double thoughts. Confessing can never be an unambiguous endeavour for truth and self-insight because every revelation of a hidden truth simultaneously serves another purpose. The confession is not infrequently meant to gain sympathy, love and acceptance from the listener and/or reader (Rousseau). Or the confession leads to the insight that truth is not revealed, but concealed. The importance of the confession therefore is not the historical referentiality but the endeavour for consistency in the speaking itself. The speaking itself is the truth of the confessor. In the process of articulation some truth might surface, but this contact with a truth is undermined if the confession is aimed at convincing an audience. Truth, Coetzee subsequently suggests in an analysis of Dostoevsky's fictional confessions, appears only in the light of death or the eye of God, at the moment in which the confession is no longer aimed at self-preservation. Essentially the conscious endeavour for such a moment already produces double thoughts. And double thoughts are irreconcilable with the closure that truth should bring. 'Dostoevsky's critique of confession', Coetzee concludes, 'is clearly bringing us to the brink of a conception of truth-telling as close to grace' (Coetzee, 1992: 287).

You cannot consciously strive for truth – truth is a question of mercy. It comes to you, it overcomes you: 'True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt, but from faith and grace' (Coetzee, 1992: 291). In a secular world, the relationship between confession and truth is therefore by definition already troubled. In that sense, the title of the novel *Disgrace* refers to a godless world. But Coetzee's essay from 1985 also articulates, in an unmistakable way, the aversion Lurie expresses fourteen years later regarding the teaching experience forced upon him, and in particular the mandatory handbook *Communications 101*.

Petrus' trial

While Soyinka ultimately draws hope of reconciliation from the poetry of L. S. Senghor, Lurie seeks shelter in music as an alternative language, as an opportunity to remove himself from the economy of exchange, to get closer to humanity (or is it the divine?) and forgiveness (or is it grace?). Consequently, his newest project focuses on composing an opera about Byron in Italy. He leaves Cape Town and moves in temporarily with his daughter Lucy, who runs a farm in Salem, a town on the Eastern Cape. There, Lurie thinks, he will be able to muse on his new plan in peace and quiet and possibly make a new start with the composition. When he drives onto the farm property, Lucy walks to the car with open arms and she kisses him affectionately on the cheek. But this cheerful introduction to a new episode in David Lurie's story is built on a shaky foundation. The fact is, the misery has only just started: Lucy and Lurie become the victims of black violence. In both incidents – the tribunal regarding Lurie's affair with a student and the rape of Lucy by three young black men who, en passant, also literally provide Lurie with a brand mark – Coetzee, according to most readers, penetrates to the heart of the central myths of post-apartheid South Africa. Forget truth and reconciliation – as long as there is no real discussion about guilt and punishment, South Africa will remain at the mercy of the economy of power and violence.

Lucy, who is explicitly concerned about human and animal rights, seems to be the one most convinced of this. Her contribution to the new South Africa consists of a simple farmer's life amongst white, coloured and black compatriots. Her assistant Petrus also lives on the property with his family, and together with him, she sells the products they cultivate at the market. In addition, she has a kennel, where people from the neighbouring townships can bring their cast-off dogs. Some of these animals are put out of their misery in the most charitable way possible by her friend, the veterinarian Bev, who lives a little further down the road. To make himself useful, Lurie helps both Lucy and Bev with their daily work. The apotheosis of this second part is undoubtedly the scene in which three young black men, under the pretext of having to make an urgent phone call, manage to get inside Lucy's house. Lurie does not trust the situation, but Lucy motions to him not to interfere. She has good relations with her neighbours and more than anything does not want to participate in the culture of racial distrust and suspicion. The young men proceed to beat Lurie severely and lock him in the bathroom. Subsequently they rape Lucy, pour gasoline on Lurie, throw a match at him, take a few things from the house and leave in

Lurie's car. As chance would have it, Petrus is nowhere to be seen in the fields or roads that afternoon.

The unwinding of this dramatic incident reflects the issues in the first part, and together the narratives actually expose in detail the problem of the breakdown of South African society. Or, as Gerrit Olivier (2003) writes in the South African magazine *Insig*, in *Disgrace* the historical logic of revenge and retribution wins out over concepts such as the rainbow nation, the African renaissance and the process of truth and reconciliation. The bankruptcy of the national myths, metaphors for recovering a paradisical mutual understanding, is strikingly illustrated in a confrontation between Lurie and Petrus. During a party at Petrus' home, Lurie recognises among the guests one of the three young men who assaulted him and raped his daughter. When he addresses Petrus about it the following day, the latter categorically refuses to talk about the matter. Petrus remains indifferent to Lurie's appeal for justice. Mind you, as far as Lurie is concerned, no one has to show remorse, but a guilty verdict must be reached. Petrus, however, adopts the attitude of the black man who says: a black man cannot be guilty towards a white man for the coming fifty years; the young man is too young to go to jail, and what is Lurie so upset about anyway since 'the insurance will give you a new car' (p. 137). Desire, revenge and retribution have supplanted the old African Ubuntu values.

While the ranks close on the side of Petrus and the black perpetrators, the bond between father and daughter runs aground due to their difference of opinion about the problem of guilt, responsibility and punishment. For Lurie, the question in this matter is not so much who is capable of forgiving whom, but who is guilty of what. While Lurie wants to summon the thieves before court regardless of the persons ('you will not be involved, I will not be involved, it will be a matter for the law' (p. 137), he says, trying to convince Petrus of the correctness of his endeavour), Lucy refuses to report the crime. She assumes, as the consequence of historical debt, the position of a martyr, thus furnishing Petrus and his people with a certain immunity. She accepts her destiny just the way it comes to her; she suffers from the pregnancy that results from the rape, but she remains uninterested in the question of guilt. The only thing remaining for her is the acceptance of Petrus' protection in exchange for a larger share of the farm. A position which Elleke Boehmer, quoted above, and many critics, have immense difficulties with because this surrender and acceptance of the unacceptable has determined the fate of women in a patriarchal society for centuries and can hardly be viewed as a desirable perspective for a society in transition.

Imagination and nation-building

An allegorical interpretation that allows itself to be guided too much by *Disgrace*'s mirror plot and that is too quick to accept the referentiality of a post-apartheid South Africa screaming for future images, however, ignores an important if not essential plot line, namely the reversal that Lucy's rape generates in David Lurie's consciousness. In innumerable places following the dramatic events in Salem, the vocabulary of confession, guilt and awareness seeps into the text. When Lurie discusses with Lucy the tragedy that has overcome them, a feeling of inadequacy and sorrow overwhelms him for the first time in the narrative: '"I did not save you".

That is his own confession' (Coetzee, 1999: 157). He subsequently manages to offer his apologies to Mr Isaacs, the father of his student Melanie, to which Isaacs reluctantly replies: 'The question is what are we going to do now we are sorry? Have you any ideas, Mr Lurie?' (p. 172). At that point in the narrative, Lurie is fully conscious of the irretrievability of his position:

> I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think that I live in disgrace without term?
> (p. 172)

From this state of shame and loss, this recognition of disgrace, there emerges a sensitivity and capacity for empathy towards others unprecedented for Lurie. This empathy undermines the opposition reflected in the reception between the black perpetrators and the white Lurie. Lurie can easily identify with the anger and the aggression of the rapists. Even though it infuriates him when these powers strike his daughter, this fury does not distinguish him from the rapists. When he gets it into his head to visit Melanie again during a theatre performance, he for his part is dismayed to have brought on the fury of her boyfriend, so that he immediately seeks refuge in paid love: 'Why not, he thinks, on this night of revelations' (p. 194). His fury at the perpetrators makes him conscious of who he is and where he stands, but that does not mean that he empathises with the victims of male lust: 'Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?' (p. 160).

Lurie's attempts to understand Lucy and to move her to safer places, as mentioned above, lead them to become increasingly estranged. When Lucy informs him that she accepts all the consequences of the situation, refuses an abortion and makes no claim to retribution, Lurie concludes that she is acting like a dog. 'Yes, like a dog' (205), Lucy agrees. Being like a dog is not a solution for Lucy, an end point, but an opportunity to remain open to the experience of the present and to maintain focus on the future: 'Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start from ground level' (205). She abandons her belongings and rights and prepares herself for a new beginning with unforeseen opportunities. In the end, as her choice seems to emphasize, justice can only be expected from a system that refuses the economy of legal procedure and conflict resolution.

In this context, it is indeed significant that the only way in which Lurie can stretch his imagination, can be receptive to other positions than that of the perpetrator, is by putting himself in the service of animals, the absolute other, the non-human without language.[3] Lurie cannot become a woman in order to understand Lucy, nor does he become a dog, but as his dedication to the dead bodies of cast-off dogs continues to increase in the course of the narrative, Lurie ultimately demonstrates a love that flows directly from 'a profound need to preserve the ethical integrity of the self', as Derek Attridge phrases it in his thorough reading of Coetzee's oeuvre (Attridge, 2005: 187).[4] Lurie is not sure himself what is happening to him, but the anonymous suffering of the animals evokes unadulterated compassion, empathy and the necessity

to intervene, to take action. He exerts all his energies to ensure that the animals end their lives in dignity, and it occurs to him that it matters that it is he of all people who is doing this. He makes a difference to the animals, and for him each cast-off dog has an individual face and a history:

> He ties the last bag and takes it to the door. Twenty three. There is only the young dog left, the one who likes music, the one who, given half a chance, would already have lolloped after his comrades into the clinic buildings, into the theatre with its zinctopped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul.
>
> (p. 219)

The integrity of this loving and almost irrational devotion becomes all the more poignant because it is articulated in Coetzee's almost impersonal and staccato prose style. The combination of the succinct style and the lyrical content gives form, in a pre-eminently literary way, to a postmodern if not post-colonial consciousness of fragmentation and complexity that is implicitly, though tersely, present in Coetzee's works. Derek Attridge (2005: 191), again, calls this a consciousness of the political necessity to build something new without banishing the unpredictable, the singular and the excessive. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee shows how literature in particular can represent and understand the otherness of the other as something that withdraws at unexpected moments and in unexpected ways from the community-building project of culture.

To conclude

Whereas the project of the TRC intended to unify the nation in an almost forced recognition of its fragmentation – the performative act of reconciliation almost risked becoming an empty mantra –, *Disgrace* both underlines and deconstructs that indispensable historical process by both deploying and thematising the concept of imagination. *Disgrace* demonstrates in an unforgettable way that in a situation as complex as South Africa's post-apartheid era, one cannot get away with empty mantras. The use of imagination makes the role of literature in the production of cultural memory both monumentalising and ambiguous. It is precisely the role of literariness to resist the assumption of unambiguous community-building. In this sense, reflection on the relationship between literature and the making of memory is similar to 'solving the problem of sex'. The past is a narrative that never settles; except in the context of eternity or before the eyes of God. It is precisely the literariness of literature that gives expression to that and to the experience of those who withdraw from the dominant mode of community-building. At the same time, this is probably the most important contribution that literature has to offer to the functioning of a cultural memory. This qualification is particularly true for Coetzee's literature, which in a nearly unparalleled way makes us sensitive to the past, the present and the prospects for the future, not only of the community to be built, but especially of the individual other. That in itself is already a resounding political effect

of the work of a pre-eminently literary writer, an effect that renders every new foundational narrative impossible. In the context of South Africa's recent totalitarian history and the present democracy that is threatening to become a one-party system, such a voice in the envisioning of a future cannot be taken seriously enough.

Notes

1 Much has been published about the relationship of trauma and cultural memory, especially in the context of the Holocaust; see, for example, Felman and Laub (1992).
2 Incidentally, this did frequently occur in the reception of *Disgrace*. See, for example, Banville (2000); Gorra (1999).
3 In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello speaks of animals that refuse to speak, that keep a dignified silence (Coetzee, 2001b).
4 Attridge (2005) shows that this need to preserve the ethical integrity of the self is felt as a motivating force by almost all of Coetzee's early characters.

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