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## Possibilities of Public Mourning in American Poetry of the 1960s

Of the different kinds of public art, those which express common grief still seem to be the least outmoded. While the glorification of war and 'victory', of the nation, or its heroes often appears anachronistic if not outright embarrassing, public mourning is still regarded as acceptable sentiment worthy of monuments, music, and also poetry. We have seen this in the aftermath of September 11; the period I will be covering here, however, is the 1960s, for I want to use an inquiry into the possibilities of public mourning as an attempt to connect history proper with the development of poetry. My starting point is the poet Robert Lowell, who has been called a historian by various critics not so much because of inquiries into the past as for his continuous engagement with the present. His well-known poem "For the Union Dead" diagnoses the possibilities and problems of public mourning by reflecting on idealizing artistic languages in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and sculpture.<sup>1</sup> The title and epigraph announce the poem as an elegiac ode, but after two world wars, in the age of nuclear warfare and at the height of the cold war it has become anachronistic to celebrate military heroism. The casual tone of private musing with which the poem begins at once denounces the elaborate artifice of public rhetoric while it also displays the meticulous poetic craftsmanship of the poet who was regarded as T. S. Eliot's rightful heir. The contrast of title and tone underlines the impression of displacement in space and time, evoked by the very first sentence. It makes the title and the motto seem like endangered historic relics, in line with all other public monuments mentioned, indeed, with public space itself.

That these cultural artifacts are juxtaposed to the world of pure naturalism, "the dark downward and vegetating kingdom of the fish and reptile," yet brilliantly merged with it in "dinosaur steamshovels" and "savage servility" betrays a fundamental ambiguity of the poem: one cannot, in 1960, imitate the artistic conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the ethos celebrated in its monuments. Yet when compared to "the ditch" and the contemporary lack of public art, as in "There are no statues for the last war here", and when noting that this absence is immediately filled by the cynicism and blasphemy of commercial advertisement, the monument becomes a nostalgic reminder of a time

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1 I quote the poem from Lowell (1977), 135-137. The poem has attracted a plethora of comments and criticism; on the poem's public stance, I found most helpful McGill (1996). On the way in which the public aspect arises from the poem's discussion of the monument, see North (1980) and Pfister (1989). A recent article which claims that Lowell "offers a set of values worthy of idealization" in his depiction of the schoolchildren as against the monument is Thurston (2000). My own position, namely that Lowell does not commit himself to any affirmation of values, is closer to Pinsky (1976, 16-23), Altieri (1979, 53-77), and Perloff (1986, 99-116). From a very different, namely an intertextual angle, Breinig comments on the poem and its treatment of the black soldiers (1990).

when artists could still express and shape public consciousness. What Lowell mourns, it seems, is the loss of a common ground and the death of a closer union of artist and public. Now, with this union dead, there is no public consciousness but only an isolated conformism, symbolized by cars. Given this diagnosis, the "shaking Civil War relief" actually gains in attractiveness.

This ambiguity is no end in itself, but before I go on to analyze it in more detail, I would like to describe some of the premises I will be working with. In the following, I will assume what Lowell assumes, namely that the possibilities and problems of public mourning in poetry point to social and literary pressures. For Lowell in 1960, the latter lie in his rejection – or exhaustion – of his earlier poetry of moral vision in an Eliotic manner and his subsequent turn in *Life Studies* to what came to be called 'Confessional Poetry'. The social pressures he evokes in his poem lie in the heightened sense of a society challenged by internal conflicts and calls for action, associated, for instance, with the civil rights movement. And finally, as a member of a former elite he has lost some of the social and political power of his ancestors, such as Colonel Shaw, but retained a sense of duty to attend to public issues. To what extent this may circumscribe his possibilities as a public poet may be ascertained by a comparison to Robert Hayden and his poems of public mourning. Like Lowell, Hayden has a sense of obligation as a poet towards the public; in his case, though, it is a heritage of the Harlem Renaissance and the documentary impetus of the 1930s. Lowell's and Hayden's resemblance with regard to public poetry is captured in their appointments as poetry consultants to the Library of Congress, an honor equivalent to the position of poet laureate. Lowell achieved this in 1947, while Hayden, who was four years older than Lowell, became the first black poet appointed to this position in 1976. As with Lowell, I will study the way Hayden strives to create a commonality that transcends all group or family affiliations. I would like to show how both poets offer their attitudes as imaginative stances to resist the divisive forces they and their audience are facing.

One may begin by observing how the description of Colonel Shaw in Lowell's poem shifts from the question of an adequate public expression of grief to one of an adequate attitude towards a public issue. 'Attitude', like the German word 'Haltung', is a function of posture in the poem: the upright figure of the Colonel who "cannot bend his back" contrasts with the crouched, that is, bent, figure of the present day poet in front of his television. He watches what many feared would again endanger the union: the enforced desegregation of schools in the south, begun when nine black teenagers insisted on their right to visit the central high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. While the Colonel's attitude is incipient to action – "he waits for the blessed break" – the poet's attitude is a substitute for it: he will not, literally, rise and take a stand.

As a result of reflecting Colonel Shaw's attitude, celebrated in the monument, this is perhaps understandable. Shaw's stiffness and rigidity bespeak a principled character unable to compromise. The absoluteness of his chosen self-sacrifice leads to a futile military action in which half of the regiment is killed. As a representative of the Bostonian elite, his posture symbolizes a sense of public duty rather than the belief in abolitionism. The black soldiers are repeatedly referred to by the poet as "his", not least by quoting Shaw's father calling them "his niggers". For his questionable

motives, Shaw's attitude is as anachronistic as the society and the relief idealizing him. On the other hand, his attitude puts him in opposition to the cowed, compliant fish, the underworld of snails and slime and grease – the world where things bend rather than break. It is to this world the poet aligns himself through his posture of crouching, becoming complicit with the "savage servility" of his age. The Colonel's uprightness is therefore a necessary contrast to justify the poet's bending attitude.

The juxtaposition so far leaves out the third party engaged in public action both in the past and in the present, the Negroes. It is the onset of the civil rights movement that lends poignancy to the discussion of a white civil war hero, and an irritating power to the monument – it is "*Their* monument" (my emphasis) that "sticks like a fishbone in the city's throat". That they add life to the monument is underlined by the imagery of air and breath associated with them and contrasted to the semantic field of suffocation suffered by the representatives of white Protestant New England. The image of air also associates the breathing bell-cheeked soldiers with the Negro school-children in the lines "When I crouch to my television set/the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons". Both, school-children and soldiers seem to present an ideal beyond Shaw and more acceptable to a modern audience; indeed, a historical connection would suggest that the deaths of the soldiers may yet be redeemed and thus point to a common vision transcending the various historical moments isolated in the poem.

Instead, the text turns upon the poet himself, for the line at once points back to the drained aquarium and the child who longed to "burst the bubbles" and simultaneously forward to the surreal, Münchhausen-like image of Shaw "riding on his bubble". "Bubble" implies the possibility that Shaw is riding a delusion, a false idealism – something the child already longed to destroy and could not. But does that mean that the schoolchildren are likewise involved in an illusionary endeavor? The point here lies not in the fine distinctions between balloons and bubbles; the point is that the imagery of air and the repeated figure of the poet fenced out or separated by a glassy screen from social action suddenly suggest an analogy between the destruction of public space, the questionable heroism of Shaw, and the school-children's act of civil courage. Moreover, it confuses ideals such as freedom and equality with the idealization of public duty as an end in itself. As in Lowell's rewriting of the Latin motto from singular ("Relinquit...") into plural ("Relinquent..."), suggesting that the soldiers, too, leave all to save a public issue, the soldiers' political ends are collapsed into the patriotism celebrated in Shaw – are they likewise to be dismissed?

I think they are; the Negro soldiers as the most living representations on the relief and a possible source of common values are brought up only indirectly through William James. Lowell uses his modernist heritage – a juxtaposition of imagery, a multiplicity of voices, and complex levels of internal relationships – to hold the Negroes carefully at bay because the possibility of social action based on a common vision endangers the elaborate balancing act of the poem. It depends on an impossible absolute ideal on the one hand and on the notion of a loss of common ground, rendering any common vision impossible, on the other. At the center of this balancing act is the poet himself bending to his television. Facing a public issue through a medium and then turning himself into one is a perfect image for Lowell. Throughout his life he is drawn to public issues,

marching through Washington if need be, but in his poetry from the 50s onwards, he presents himself as mere observer, unable to interfere and doubting the significance of collective action including his own. "I am learning to live in history. / What is history? What you cannot touch" he writes in *Notebook 1967-68* and later suggests we might learn from moles "... only in touch with what they touch; / blind fur, in mourning ...".<sup>2</sup> Here as in "For the Union Dead", the assumed inability to engage with anything beyond one's immediate reality appears more as a premise for his reflective, melancholy mood, rather than its result. Lowell needs the setting of social ruin to justify himself as passively suffering spectator, but he also needs the social sphere because in a world of pure naturalism, without anything to transcend the self, there is nothing to reflect.

The self-portrayal is certainly not a flattering one; in fact, Lowell has been praised for the critical description of the diminished role of the poet as yet another contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century public speaker. Yet, I wonder whether we are not likewise meant to identify with or at least recognize ourselves in Lowell. He presents himself as a disillusioned observer, but one whose reflection of this status and its political impotence opens up a common ground between the poet and the public, likewise skeptical in facing current conflicts, hopes, and demands for action. This is quite an achievement; it is much easier to speak for a vocal minority taking to the streets and rebelling against "savage servility", than for a silent majority staying home and watching television. The problem is that to defend this common ground, Lowell has to ignore the possibility of values less absolute than those he dismisses, yet strong enough to transcend the individual and to challenge his reduced poetic vision. He does so at the cost of those acting on a common vision. These are at the center of Hayden's volume *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970).

Its central poem with that title struggles with the right words at a time diagnosed within the same coordinates Lowell used: the memory of the Civil War, the civil rights movement, and nuclear armament, to which new grievances have been added, such as the Vietnam War and the assassinations of the Kennedys, of Martin Luther King and of Malcolm X. As in Lowell, Hayden's elegiac mode is an attempt to overcome social divisiveness. This is made difficult for him because as a black poet the role forced constantly upon him has been that of a spokesman for the people who were presumably 'his'. The modernist artifice of his poetry is partly a counterforce to that pressure; it is also the formal expression of the belief that it is possible to transform and transcend social realities through art. Because the long poem "Words in the Mourning Time" demonstrates vividly the possibilities and also the problems of this transformation, I want to introduce this poet by a shorter poem, which follows upon "Words in the Mourning Time" in the volume.

"Monet's 'Waterlilies'" begins with a deliberate provocation:

Today as the news from Selma and Saigon  
poisons the air like fallout,

2 These quotes come from the poems "Mexico", section 5, and "Half a Century Gone", section 3, in Lowell (1969, 60 and 154).

I come again to see  
the serene great picture that I love.<sup>3</sup>

On a day that summarizes the 60s various horrors, the violence used against the Civil Rights movement in Selma, the Vietnam war and nuclear armament – has a black poet nothing better to do than to see a painting? One that is not even vaguely related to public affairs but offers a momentary escape through meditative contemplation!? However, to "come again to see" also suggests a sense of obligation, so that he may contemplate that serene picture not because but despite political turmoil, not to escape but to perform an act of love on a day that opened with news of violence. Hayden, too, raises the question of the relation of art to the public sphere in times of political turmoil, but the task he sets himself seems to be much more difficult than Lowell's: whereas the Bostonian sets out to undercut 19<sup>th</sup> century public art and poetry, Hayden has nothing to undercut but much to affirm – after this opening, he has to justify the value of art in times of political violence, that is the value of words in the mourning time.

His description of the painting with its focus on vision as both perceptual and religious emphasizes artifice as a transformation of space, time, the seen, and the known into a timeless illumination. The central idea here is that of 'incarnation', a familiar concept to capture the intersection of timelessness with the flux of experience in time. However, the line "illusive flesh of light" with its puns on 'illusive' and 'elusive', on 'flesh' and 'flash', and its liquid l-sounds underlines that this incarnation is paradoxically achieved through dissolution, a loss of presumably solid premises; it is not a careful order imposed on flux by a superior artistic mind, but a perception of light "as through refracting tears", an experience intensified through mourning.

The last three lines supplement the vision by generalizing and interpreting the effect the painting has on the poet as a reminder of a common loss. Hayden is careful not to manipulate grief and the memory of joy for political ends at this point. Retrospectively however, the "fall out" of a world and its joy is already foreshadowed in the opening lines; the symmetrical patterning of the stanzas suggests that to "come again to see" the painting is not an escape away from social realities but an act that provides a passage through which the news from Selma and Saigon gain significance. To remember a common loss initiates self-knowledge leading to wisdom that transcends the individual as well as the limits of time and place and the boundaries between nations and races. This, of course, is a prerequisite to being touched by what we cannot touch. While the last three lines are necessary to reconcile the visionary passage and

3 I quote from Hayden (1985, 101). "Words in the Mourning Time" can be found on pp. 90-100. As a black poet, writing in a modernist vein, Hayden does not fit critical paradigms. Two articles which discuss, first, the questionable category of 'black poetry' and secondly link him to a Modernist tradition are Turco (1977) and Conniff (1999). His use of history is often discussed with regard to the long poem "Middle Passage", but the following articles are sufficiently general to illuminate his other poetic works as well: Davis (1973), Williams (1977), Kutzinski (1986). A detailed discussion of the last poems in the volume I discuss here is offered by Oehlschlaeger (1985). A biography with a very strong emphasis on Hayden's Bahá'í faith is offered by Hatcher (1984).

the reference to daily news, they also underline the pressure onto the particulars of social reality to dissolve into a transforming vision – this is why Monet is so appropriate. The resistance to transformation is apparent in the opening lines of "Words in the Mourning Time": "For King, for Robert Kennedy, destroyed by those they could not save, for King for Kennedy I mourn". King and Kennedy, like Selma and Saigon, may be transformed into poetic tropes, but "Robert" is difficult to accept as poetic and as savior. The first name is a deliberate irritation in the elevated style of lament. Its repetitions of words, the alliterations and the complicated syntax underline a will to form and a deliberately artificial voice. It sets up the central tensions between mourning and religious belief, between elegy and prophecy and between an idea of historical order through which to understand and endure process, and the need to retain freedom of feeling.

The danger is to project an over-assertive prophetic voice as a source of knowledge that will override particulars and a personal response to them. To counter that danger and to mediate the tensions, the poem's ten sections alternate between visionary and discursive passages. The contradictions and paradoxes of the visions attempt to make the central theme of self-betrayal and lack of self-knowledge visible. But lack cannot easily be transformed into an affirmation, as we have seen in "Waterlilies" – for that the poet switches into a different mode, explicating the significance of the visions for the present. These modes are integrated by foregrounding pattern and structure. They present the text as a dialectical argument that centers on the relation between ends and means and the idea of history, both individual and collective, as a continuous search for self-knowledge.

The rhetorical questions of section 2, "Killing people to save, to free them? / With napalm lighting routes to the future?" evoke the official US rhetoric on the war in Vietnam as an example of self-betrayal; they also present a perverted version of the prophecy whereby deaths are only means toward a better future. It is perverted because the ideals presented as ends are really the means to justify violence and war. But the abuse of an ideal for a particular purpose easily leads to a dismissal of the ideal at large – this is precisely what happened in Lowell's poem. To kill for freedom will kill freedom, or as section 5 puts it: "We hate kill destroy / in the name of human good / our killing and our hate destroy". Reasoning is abruptly followed by nightmarish visions in sections 3 and 4, which now capture the tensions and paradoxes in symbolic terms. The symbolism of a meal, and its extreme and surreal versions of last supper, cannibalistic feast, or wild carousal denote destruction, but in connection with hunger, it also emphasizes a need, which becomes a source of poetic power. A second symbol is fire, likewise associated with wounds and wild destruction, but also with a purification and purgatory. Burning and eating merge in a meditation on Vietnam where fire devours children while the poet's students as both perpetrators and victims die killing.

Sections 6-8 are a variation and intensification of the themes and patterns set up so far. Their middle piece is a sermon, preaching in words that echo M. L. King's, love as means and end. The sermon is framed by two hellish visions whose setting is no longer the war in Vietnam but the war-like riots in inner cities, which began in Watts (LA) in

1965 and erupted throughout the 60s, not least in Washington after King's assassination. The first is a surreal vision of riot as worship, of hatred against others as hatred against oneself, and as a perverted desire for spiritual nourishment and a search for identity. These torturous contradictions are captured in oxymoron, chiasmus and the central symbolism of a burning cannibal ruler presiding over a bloody feast. With "hey nonny no" and "burn baby burn" Hayden integrates the chanting of the rioters into a perverse religious ritual which then prepares the ground for the sermon announced as "voice in the wilderness". It provides the transition to the second vision, where fire has now purging connotations, illuminating the

fire-focused  
 image  
 of a man  
 invisible man  
 and black boy and native  
 son and the  
 man who  
 lives underground whose  
 name nobody  
 knows  
 harrowing havocking  
 running through  
 holocaust  
 seeking the  
 soul-country of his  
 meaning.

The line-breaks dissolve the text and help to focus on the concepts that arise from a transforming vision of the riots: man, knowledge, and meaning. Without a verb, syntax and participles dissolve a black man never called that but evoked through allusions to the novels of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, into facets of the same man and thus into an emblem of mankind's spiritual state. His setting – Vietnam or America as two versions of "holocaust" – is likewise symbolic, a "violent ghetto, slum / of the spirit raging against itself". The meaning searched for is obviously not the self-knowledge sought in confessional poetry, because the individual as black man is bound to forces larger than himself. It is rather a knowledge latent in the human mind that needs to be awakened by the unsettling dissolution of realities "as through refracted tears", mirrored in the dissolution of the text.

Thus prepared, the ninth section, the last before the poem ends with a prayer, turns that human need into an affirmation of humanity as that which is needed, "the vision of a human world where godliness / is possible and man / is neither gook nigger honkey wop nor kike / but man / permitted to be man". This is again the sermonizing voice and it is difficult not to sense a certain jolt in between "what can I say / but this, this" and what follows – or even to suspect that the previous lines are a rhetorical ploy to set the scene for his priestly entry. Yet these first two stanzas demonstrate why Hayden cannot merely record details of cruelty.

As the gook woman howls  
 for her boy in the smouldering,  
 as the expendable Clean-Cut Boys  
 From Decent American Homes  
 are slashing off enemy ears for keepsakes;

as the victories are tallied up  
 with flag-draped coffins, plastic bodybags,  
 what can I say  
 but this, this:

Any recording, however distancing it tries to be (for instance through capitalization of "Decent American Homes" and their juxtaposition with the barbarism of war), will yet be complicit with the language and attitude of the present time – it is only after reading this section through that we might regard "gook woman" as another quote, similar to the capitalized terms. Lowell's "niggers" come to mind here, since both poets work with different voices and shifting moral positions. But whereas Lowell uses them to obscure his own, Hayden evokes moral erosion and uncertainty to overcome it. He has to lift himself above them to affirm the determination not to succumb to easy solutions or to political pressures. This, as the religious tone suggests, is an act of will which is necessary to go on; the vision of humanity does not follow smoothly from plastic bodybags.

No other poem in the volume needs the interference of an explanatory, exhorting voice as much as "Words in the Mourning Time", and in no other poem is it justified as explicitly through reference to Hayden's Bahá'í faith. In the sequence of poems in the volume and in Hayden's poetic achievement to that point, a modernist impersonal stance is coupled with the documentary impetus to uncover the voices of the slave trade, Turner's slave rebellion, or the underground escape routes and to make them part of a larger vision of human spiritual progress. To the conflicts and hopes of his own time he responds by intensifying the inclusiveness of the vision, stating the theme of humanity's "disastrous quest for meaning" in the opening poem "The Sphinx". It is followed by poems dramatizing the quest in places such as a battlefield of the Civil War or an arsenal of nuclear missiles. Its clearest manifestation, however, can be found in "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz". The subtitle, "Malcolm X" and epigraph, "O masks and metamorphoses of Ahab, Native Son" introduce the black leader as the embodiment of continuing renewal, a change of masks in the attempt to shed self-destructive images of himself.

Thus the tendency towards self-betrayal, individually and socially, is revealed not as a doctrine of a particular faith but through the conflicts and tragedies of American history; the allusions to writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, or Paul Lawrence Dunbar, as well as the evocation of masks and stereotypes are a reminder that the tenets of the Persian founders of Bahá'í are also central issues in African American writing. Its most memorable formulation is provided by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* where he described the consequences of racism for the Negro as being "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself

through the revelation of the other world".<sup>4</sup> Racism leads to distorted self-knowledge, which precludes the full realization of one's abilities and does not permit man to be man. Likewise, a society in which a large portion of its citizens is invisible to the rest has no proper conception of itself, something that will impede its social, political, and artistic life. It is a curious blindness in American social thought that pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey or George H. Mead also diagnosed society's lack of self-knowledge and its inability to recognize itself properly as the major problem of American democracy, yet never realized to what extent black intellectuals have been struggling with that concept – but here I am concerned with the two poets.

I began by charging Lowell for not distinguishing between public duty as an end in itself and public action as a means to reach an ideal. This deliberate confusion allows him his bleak diagnosis, which, in turn, legitimizes his passive reflexivity. If there was meaning in the deaths of the black soldiers, it would reverberate into the present through the school-children and challenge the poet's attitude. He therefore has to dismiss the soldiers along with Shaw in order to absorb current public action into a scene in which he dramatizes his plight as public poet. For Hayden, the relations Lowell denies between ideal and reality, between vision and social action, and between timelessness and time, are crucial. It is his task as a poet to reveal how the present still allows for visions of humanity once a distorted self-conception is shed. To reveal the timeless in time he must bring the details of a cruel prose world, the "Roberts", the "enemy ears for keepsakes", and the "plastic bodybags" in contact with visions of timelessness. Words that refuse to be read as tropes and witness a specific historical moment are embedded into a formal complexity in which typography, symbolism, and the rhythm and sound of language are used to break through and beyond the reality of daily politics, to reveal continuity and meaning in history. Lowell, however, can neither wholly embrace nor wholly reject "the ditch" on the one hand and the glorification of Shaw in the monument on the other; the many-layered references that make "For the Union Dead" a perfect "schoolroom poem", as Marjorie Perloff wrote, make it possible for him to hold a passive position between pure naturalism and the glorification of an absolute ideal. There is no significant social action and public mourning is thus an impossibility – but one publicly reflected upon by the poet. For Hayden, mourning acknowledges the failures to realize humanity and points to a loss of vision he tries to recover as a basis for social action.

There is a final twist in the poets' attitudes to poetry and public action: for both of them, mourning is also an appropriate poetic stance because it captures the awareness of their reduced public roles. As the elevated positions of eulogist or prophet are no longer available, mourning offers a way to deplore the current state of affairs without assuming superior access to possible solutions. And yet, the poet who captured so poignantly his passivity in his poetry involved himself in public affairs throughout his life. Lowell volunteered as a soldier, became a conscientious objector, declined an invitation to dinner in the White House and took part in the March to Washington – all

4 DuBois (1903, 3). Yet another African American philosopher who wrote about the effects of distorted self-knowledge due to stereotypes was Alain Locke. Like Hayden, he was a member of Bahá'í faith. See Hatcher (1984, 9).

of this done with the publicity that inevitably accompanied his name. Hayden, in contrast, who insisted on the continuing validity of ideals as basis for social action, resisted all attempts to engage in political causes and suffered the slurs and insults of his outraged colleagues. For him, the claim that his mourning transcends race or any particular social group would have been endangered by participation in political causes – it was hard enough as it was to be accepted as "a poet who happens to be Negro" (Hatcher 1984, 78). The poet who happened to be a Lowell, however, could only gain by repeatedly attracting a young audience involved in the political turmoil of his time that would otherwise hardly read his poetry. And thus Hayden's role as public poet is circumscribed by his individual existence as a citizen and vice versa, whereas Lowell was able to bring these two existences in a profitable complementary relation to an extent that suggested to many that they are one. This is why, from today's perspective, Lowell seems to be one of the last truly public poets; but it is Hayden, I think, whose plight may be more relevant to contemporary poets.

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