

**Surface without Aperture:
Interpretive Uncertainty in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the
Barbarians***

Senior Paper

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By *Joel Herring*

Thesis Director
Dr. Blake Hobby

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Gwen Ashburn

At a critical moment in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate escapes from his cell to denounce the public beating of twelve barbarian captives. Colonel Joll summons the deposed leader to his office the following day. Joll, an officer of the Empire's Third Bureau, demands that the magistrate account for poplarwood slips he has been collecting from nearby ruins. Examining the slips, which are inscribed with a series of enigmatic characters, the magistrate doesn't even "know whether to read from right to left" and has "no idea" what the symbols "stand for" (no). He wonders if a circular character is meant to represent the sun; if it describes the physical "state of the tongue, the lips, [and] the throat" as they work together to produce a specific word; or if it merely stands for what it is—a circle, plain and simple (no). He has pored over the slips previously, and arranged them in differing grids, attempting to piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle or map (16). Despite the fact that he has isolated "over four hundred different characters in the script," he fears these are actually "scribal embellishments" on a "repertory of 20 or 30" "primitive forms" (110-111).

Although the magistrate cannot read the script with any more accuracy than Joll can, this fact does not stop him from forwarding a deliberately false translation of the scrawl set before him, weaving a narrative:

"We went to fetch your brother yesterday. They showed us into a room where he lay on a table sewn up in a sheet [...]! tore the sheet wide open and saw bruises all over his body and saw that his feet were swollen and broken. "What happened to him?" I said. "I do not know," said the man, "it is not on the paper." (ill)

His narrative critiques torture and imperialism, but it also foregrounds the role the interpreter plays in creating meaning from texts. At a pivotal point in the scene, the magistrate pauses to examine a single character: "It is the barbarian character *war*" he claims, "but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing what sense is intended" (112). In this passage, and throughout the text, the magistrate's experience parallels the difficulties faced by the postmodern reader. The magistrate can be understood as the translator who, despite his insufficient grasp of a text, forwards an authoritative interpretation.

The magistrate's reading of the slips provides a useful reference point for the reader and critic of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Lance Olsen, in "The Presence of Absence"—one of the earliest scholarly studies of barbarians—argues that the "wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways" (53).

For Olsen, the slips mirror the novel, in which language remains at the mercy of the interpreter and holds no inherent significance independent of an interpretive agent. In his estimation, postmodern fiction like Coetzee's novel leaves the reader with a sense of "despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world" (55). Olsen's argument resonates for many readers of Coetzee. The enigmatic quality of barbarians—emphasized by the magistrate's repeated references to interpretation and his anxiety about making definitive assertions—undoubtedly makes it difficult to locate a center of authority in the book. However, as Susan Van Zanten Gallagher argues, "the fact that the slips do not hold a single meaning does not mean they are without meaning" (281). By reading the absence of authority in *Barbarians* as a limiting factor, Olsen undervalues the various readings Coetzee's elusive work engenders.

Barbara Eckstein reads Olsen's critique as an "aesthetic defense" of Coetzee, one directed at critics who claim the author fails to address pressing moral and ethical issues (177). These critics read the unspecified temporal and geographical setting of *Waiting for the Barbarians* through a straightforward allegorical lens, disapproving of its lack of worldly reference. In his 1980 review, Peter Lewis claims that the novel's attempts to "establish universals" move it "so far away from the familiar... that it defeats its own

purpose"(qtd. in Gallagher 281). Michael Vaughan, a Marxist critic, takes issue with the tendency towards "ever greater vagueness with regard to...historical subject matter" in *Barbarians* (127). Nadine Gordimer, the most prominent of the critics named here, views all Coetzee's early fiction as refusing to engage with the historical situation in South Africa. Gordimer holds that in times of political crisis, it is the artist's duty to critique oppressive regimes, and numerous critics agree with her, criticizing what they see as Coetzee's preoccupation with the concerns of a white liberal elite and his failure to represent South African oppression under apartheid. By reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegory, Lewis, Vaughan, and Gordimer overlook the magistrate's own implicit warning against allegorical reading. Translating the slips for Joll, he states, "they form an allegory [...] further, each single slip can be read in many ways" (112). The magistrate acknowledges that an allegorical interpretive approach will yield many meanings, but his own misinterpretation simultaneously undermines the accuracy or finality of these interpretations.¹ Coetzee, through the magistrate, positions his particular "allegory" as a text that—when divided into its individual parts and examined carefully—resists oversimplified, universal readings. When the magistrate notes that

¹ Teresa Dovey posits that two constructions of the allegorical mode at work in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The first "does not see itself as interpretation and, thus, seeks unmediated access to 'pure meaning'" The second construction, which is at work in the magistrate's "strategic reading" of the slips, "claims for itself a kind of freedom to make meaning" (Dovey 144,145).

"there is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret" the barbarian script, he anticipates the widely disparate readings that critics apply to *Barbarians* itself (112).

For several years following the initial release of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, criticism split into two camps. Critics in Gordimer's camp, by searching for explicit political engagement, found the novel lacking in the extreme; by contrast, those more in line with Olsen's critique found a rich store of commentary on the nature of language and interpretation. The critical conversation was limited to these partisan approaches until the introduction of Teresa Dovey's *Lacanian Allegories* in 1988. Dovey argues that the "deconstructive activity of Coetzee's novels" is not an "empty textual game," but an attempt to destabilize historical discourse itself (Dovey 148). She describes Coetzee's approach as a more nuanced form of political and historical engagement, and her argument significantly alters the critical conversation surrounding Coetzee.

David Attwell's "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee" is particularly indebted to Dovey's scholarship. Attwell argues that the "resources of postmodernism in fiction [enable] rather than [undermine] an historical engagement" (581). Along with Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, Attwell goes to great lengths to, in Samuel Durrant's words, "rehistoricise Coetzee's fiction by emphasizing its discursive relevance to the time and place in which it was produced" (24). Reading Coetzee

"against the grain" in this fashion may seem out of keeping with the author's own statements on history's antagonistic relationship to fiction—he disapproves of the "colonization of the novel by the discourse of history" ("The Novel Today" 4). An interview between Coetzee and Tony Morphet, however, makes Attwell's project appear quite relevant: "I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in all my books," Coetzee notes, "ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them on occasions like the present one" (464). Coetzee refuses to provide a "master discourse" (Kossew 3) to guide interpretation of his novels, choosing instead to employ an indeterminate language that resists any final, authoritative analysis. Some interpret this elusiveness as political quietude, while others—like Jennifer Wenzel—read the novel as providing "a nexus of the political and poststructural, the historical and linguistic" (61). Examining the silence of the tortured body in the novel, Wenzel finds relevant contrasts between the magistrate's refusal to impose definitive interpretations on the barbarian girl and Empire's desire to impose a "voice" on its marginalized subjects. Waiting for the Barbarians elicits widely differing readings, which span the gamut from Gordimer to Wenzel. This disparity among critics reflects the indeterminate language of the novel.

Bearing in mind the discourse of the novel itself—specifically, its focus on the role the interpreter plays in determining textual significance—it is difficult to forward a definitive interpretation of *Barbarians*. Derek Attridge has recently made a vital contribution to the critical conversation on Coetzee, arguing that the novel should be approached as an event rather than a puzzle to be deciphered: "I treat it [the text] as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place [...] go through" (39). In a novel where authoritative meaning is so difficult to locate, the reader plays an indispensable role in creating significance from the text; *Waiting for the Barbarians* engages the reader in the same active process of interpretation that the magistrate undergoes when translating the barbarian script. Ultimately, the reader shares in his project, anxiously working to solidify textual meaning.

The magistrate employs a similarly inconclusive method of translation in his attempts to interpret the marks on the body of a barbarian girl who has been tortured by Joll. Though he is dealing with a human being, the magistrate approaches the girl much like he would a text, "reading" her—in essence—to elicit the story of her time in the torture chamber. Rosemary Jolly argues, "the magistrate's fascination with the barbarian girl stems from her body as the site of torture, rather than any desire for the

'girl' herself. He worships the surface of her body, the skin, the site of interaction between torture and tortured" (127). The magistrate admits that "until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her;" in doing so he exposes the disconnected and objective relationship he has toward her (*Waiting* 31). To the magistrate, her body is little more than an artifact to be decoded, an encrypted record he hopes will reveal the secrets of Joll's chamber.

Drawn to a "caterpillar" shaped scar "in the corner of one [of her] eye[s]" (31), the magistrate mistakenly thinks that by uncovering the cause of this "worm-like scar" he will come to know the origin of her blindness. While she initially refuses to answer his questions about the scar, the girl later tells him, "That is nothing. That is where the iron touched me. It made a little burn" (41). Far from revealing the cause for her damaged vision, the mark is incidental, a surface wound that does not penetrate her actual eye. This disclosure seems to disappoint the magistrate: he experiences "resentment" and even "stirrings of outrage" towards the girl immediately following (41). Although the magistrate wishes to "restore" the girl to her original, intact state—the one she inhabited prior to being tortured—he appears far more interested in gleaning the "traces of a history her body bears" (64). "To [his] disappointment," these marks "do not go deep enough" (64). The magistrate is more interested in the "writing" left by her torturers

than in the story of the girl herself. In his attempts to "read" the external marks of torture on her body, though, he often fails to recognize the "mark" his own interrogations leave on her consciousness.

Rather than work to understand the totality of her being, the magistrate treats the girl alternately as a charity case, a pet (comparing her to his "silver-fox-cub" [34]), and, as noted above, a text. His inability to communicate with her—to elicit her story—stems from a flawed approach. He is incapable of remembering her face before she was taken to Joll's chamber, and this failing is inextricably linked to his lack of insight into her individuality. He cannot see her as anything more than a tortured body, a physical record of horrific processes to be carefully studied. To him it is as if the girl's body has "no interior, only a surface across which [he] hunt[s] back and forth seeking entry" (43). But it is precisely because he approaches her body as a surface that he cannot gain access to her interior world. His repeated attempts to wash away the effects of torture from the girl's body with soap and water allow him to clear his conscience long enough to "fall into a sleep of oblivion"(28). This washing mirrors his notion that the torturer must ritually "wash his hands" after leaving the chamber in order to "return and break bread with other men" (12). For the magistrate, the body's surface corresponds directly to the human interior, and this is the failure of his approach. Brian

May writes that in Coetzee's novel, "there is no peeling away the body to reveal a radiant essence or informing idea" (407). The body is not a viable medium through which an interpreter can productively approach the interior of another individual. Regardless of the techniques the magistrate and Joll employ to reveal the girl's secret narrative, her body remains "closed, ponderous" (*Waiting* 42), refusing to signify.

When the magistrate is not trying to decipher the marks on the barbarian girl, he engages in what he calls his "old recreations": he "catalogue[s]" his "various collections," "collates [...] maps of the southern desert region," and carries on his "excavations" of the nearby ruins (38). The magistrate's concern with mapping the region surrounding his outpost illustrates his emphatic need to categorize a vast and unexplored landscape and contain it on the surface of a page. He does express doubt about the accuracy of these maps, however. He warns Joll that they "are based on little but hearsay [...]! have patched them together from traveler's accounts over a period of ten or twenty years" (12). By his admission, the magistrate distills the narratives of others and authors his own rendering of the landscape; this project is closely aligned with his attempts to render in language the girl's account of suffering. Just as he creates maps of a territory he has never "set foot" on, he wants to record the narrative of a torture chamber he has never entered. The magistrate is aware that both these projects are inconclusive.

Nevertheless, he thinks that continued research will lend his collations and interpretations authority. But even when his body suffers through the harsh landscape beyond his outpost and the humiliations of the torture chamber, his experiences offer relatively little insight into either the vast geographic terrain or the interior of the barbarian girl.

As the magistrate excavates the ruins, searching for artifacts of a lost civilization, he doubts he has "only scratched the surface" (15). He imagines the ruins of another settlement ten feet beneath the one he explores, implicitly acknowledging that relics of many potential civilizations lie buried beneath the sand. Even if he were able to collect and collate all of them, the relics remain blank surfaces absent of meaning until he forms an interpretation of them. When that occurs, the only information the artifacts can reveal is a narrative that the magistrate himself mediates. No authoritative conclusion can be reached in studying these enigmatic objects, but this does not subdue the magistrate's drive to continue exploring the barbarian settlement.

On a particular evening the magistrate "linger[s] among the ruins [...] into the violet dusk [...] the hour when, according to lore, ghosts awaken" (16). He places his ear to the sand, hoping to hear what the local children claim to hear: "thumps and groans under the earth, the deep irregular beating of drums" (16). When he encounters no

sound but "the patter of sand driving from nowhere to nowhere," and waits for an hour without receiving a sign, he slumps home, disgusted with his foolishness (16). These attempts to hear "sighs and cries" of the dead illustrate a characteristic mistake in the magistrate's interpretive approach (112). He is preoccupied with surfaces, and specifically with the notion that surfaces echo with the deeper significance of a history they bear. Although the magistrate is frequently conscious of the alterations that arise during his interpretative process, at certain times he fails to recognize such changes. He acknowledges that his attempt to hear the ghosts of a lost civilization is driven by vanity, but he often fails to see the similarities between this act and his attempts to read the body of the barbarian girl.

If we understand the magistrate as a mirror of the self-aware reader, then Colonel Joll can be read to fulfill the role of unselfconscious reader—or author—in the text. One of the more significant ironies in the novel centers on the fact that Joll considers himself primarily an extractor of truth and seems unaware of the factual distortions his torturous interrogations bring about. In a particularly telling scene, the colonel leads twelve barbarian prisoners into the town square, and writes the word "ENEMY" in charcoal onto the backs of their kneeling bodies (105). By doing so, he uses language to render the captives as enemies. His act highlights the power of Empire to assert binary

oppositions—to delineate the righteous from the savage. When Joll's soldiers begin beating the prisoners relentlessly with "green cane staves," the magistrate soon realizes that "the game...is to beat them till their backs are washed clean" (105). This symbolic act serves to "erase" the barbarian threat—but Joll fails to notice the fact that he himself is authoring that threat. As Michael Valdez Moses argues, "the power and skill of Empire, its *art*, lie in its capacity to generate and interpret its own signs" (Moses 121). Instead of working to accurately understand the cultures that they overtake and oppress, the agents of Empire define those cultures by an external standard, and read their own demarcation as inherent—rather than mediated—truth. When we consider the barbarian others as blank slips inscribed by Empire's definition, we quickly uncover the folly of Joll's approach. "The only truth which Joll can conceivably extract from the body of the tortured," Moses notes, is the very "truth" he himself "has projected into or onto the blank space of the victim" (121). Joll not only authors the barbarian threat by writing on the body, he symbolically eliminates the threat by erasing that very writing. In the process, he fails to understand the active role he plays, the fact that he is reading and negating his own created "truth" and not an underlying reality.

Of course, the magistrate himself functions—in his role as reader—as a type of co-author, and we are reminded repeatedly in *Barbarians* of the proximity between the two

men's differing interpretive approaches. Where one uses brutal and unsympathetic tactics to extract information from the barbarian girl, the other attempts to gently draw out her hidden story of suffering. Both play an instrumental role in constructing the girl's "truth" to fit their own preconceptions, and in the process, they obscure—or at least color—any truth inherent within the girl herself. "As a man of the first world," Barbara Eckstein notes, the magistrate "is accustomed to assigning meaning to sentient signs, particularly signs of the (barbarian) third world" (193). In this sense he is closely related to Colonel Joll. While the magistrate strives to elucidate the text of the girl's body and honor her story, he ultimately realizes that his explication attempts are just as mired in personal conjecture as Joll's—a man whom he originally perceived as his nemesis.

Though the magistrate presents himself as a well-meaning interpreter, the reader eventually recognizes a sinister aspect underlying his benign intentions. At one point, he questions "whether, when I lay head to foot with [the girl], fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply [as Joll]" (135). His wish to erase the marks Joll left on the girl's body, while at first seemingly harmless, is actually motivated by a desire to replace these markings with his own. The "alien body" of the barbarian girl, though "beyond

comprehension" (42)—and of which "there is nothing [he] can say with certainty" (43)—nonetheless "yields to everything" (30). In the same way that the slips can have meaning ascribed to them, the magistrate can provide his rendition of her suffering, but the actual narrative of her time in the chamber lies outside the text, inaccessible to the reader and incapable of being expressed in language. In this sense, Coetzee collapses the girl with the text; where meaning can be imposed upon either, no final, authoritative reading can be reached.

The reader or critic who encounters *Waiting for the Barbarians* is by no means a passive witness to the anxieties of the interpretive process. Coetzee deliberately weaves gaps into the fabric of his novel, and these absences invite the reader to render the text whole by contributing their own interpretations. Of course, such narrative gaps are a defining feature of all *writerly* texts, and one common in modern and postmodern fiction.² What sets *Barbarians* apart is the foregrounding of the interpretive act within the novel itself—the gaps that the magistrate encounters when attempting to read both the barbarian script and the barbarian girl. When the magistrate worries that "it is I who am seducing myself [...] into these meanings and correspondences" (44), he posits

² *Waiting for the Barbarians*, by Roland Barthes's definition, is a "writerly" text—one that actively engages the reader in the process of determining textual meaning (*S/Z* 3). This type of work has no prescribed message written into it, but rather engages in a free play of language that the reader then solidifies into significance. With numerous narrative gaps—moments existing outside the text—the *writerly* text forces the reader to form subjective interpretations.

meaning not as something inherent to a text—or to a body—but as a construction largely dependent on the interpretive faculties of an external agent.

By having the magistrate question the authority of readings he applies to indecipherable texts, Coetzee also casts doubt on definitive critical readings of *Barbarians*. He presents the novel itself as an elusive surface, one that seduces the reader into determining meaning while simultaneously problematizing the solidity of such interpretations. The cryptic dream sequences he intersperses throughout the book are a defining aspect of Coetzee's narrative seduction. While the magistrate obsessively interprets external realities, he never explicates his nighttime visions. Not once does he proffer an interpretation for these sequences, whether definitive or otherwise; he is more likely to express his physical state upon waking than to attempt to draw significance from his dream.

The dreams are most often followed by a temporal break—a gap in the narrative—but in the only instance where the magistrate does provide commentary, his narrative is grounded in physical detail:

I emerge from the dream cold and stiff. It is an hour yet to first light, the fire is dead, my scalp feels numb with cold. The girl beside me sleeps

huddled in a ball. I get out of bed and with my greatcloak wrapped about me start rebuilding the fire. (53)

The magistrate appears to seek no correspondence between his dreams and his waking life with the girl, but this absence of commentary invites the reader to create a relationship between the two. In the dream preceding the above passage, for instance, the magistrate sees—for the first time—the face of the central figure from his recurring dream, the figure we are led to believe represents the barbarian girl. In two previous dreams, he has failed "to imagine the face beneath the petals of her peaked hood" and seen her visage revealed as "blank, featureless...not a face at all" (10, 37). The reader seeking to discern a pattern from these sequences might equate the magistrate's ability to see her face with his strident comments from the night before, when he took up the barbarian cause in response to an agent of the Empire. She might find a connection between the fetal position of the sleeping girl and the fact that, in the dream, she appears as "a smiling child." But this reading grasps for significance in an elusive text; a more plausible argument would be that she is merely cold due to the lack of fire.

Considering the magistrate's own lack of comment, we can surmise that the dreams are a sovereign territory that has no direct relation to the conscious events of the novel. But this lack of exact correspondence does not deter one from reading significance into the

magistrate's dreams in *Barbarians*, or from uncovering a seeming pattern between his waking life and his unconscious.

Numerous critics read the dreams in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as possessing a "key[...]to the labyrinth" of Coetzee's novel, and their arguments have a measure of credence (*Waiting* 87)³. As noted above, the magistrate first glimpses the face of the dream figure after confronting an agent of Empire and championing the position of the barbarians. When he finally sees her fully realized as an adult, it directly follows his outcry against the public beating of twelve barbarian prisoners, when he receives a powerful blow across his face. Sleeping in his cramped cell, the girl in the dream offers him a "shapeless lump" that becomes a "loaf of bread, still hot" (109). She is smiling, and he notices her "beautiful teeth" and "clear jet-black eyes" (109). Here the magistrate's pain and imprisonment allow him finally to identify with the plight of the barbarian girl. Instead of seeing the girl incompletely, as he does during the time she spends lodging with him, his bodily suffering permits him an awareness of the girl that no language can encapsulate. Samuel Durrant argues that, "in his dreams, the magistrate's experience of torture [...] ultimately allowfs] him a form of access" to the experience of the barbarian girl (48). On closer examination, though, Durrant's

³Durrant, Wenzel, Gallagher, May and Eckstein all locate pertinence in the magistrate's dream sequences.

assertion is undermined. The magistrate's vision of the girl is not a true representation, but a construction of his own imagination. The "round cap" she wears, the "braided" hair, even the clarity of her eyes—these are not attributes of the girl herself. Rather, they are proof that the magistrate has finally subsumed the girl's narrative, and she now exists only as a distorted figure in his memory.

Far from a moment of clarity, this dream more likely represents the magistrate's final loss of the girl, the success of his desire to "obliterate" her (47). Just as the magistrate searches for an answer in the girl's face, finding only "two glassy black insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (44), so too does the reader of *Barbarians* impart meaning to the novel which derives largely from an indefinite interpretive process. Although we locate correspondences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate's uncertainty undermines any patterns we might impose. The magistrate admits to "searching] for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves," and his statement resonates (44). A similar experience often troubles the assiduous reader of *Barbarians*, when the indeterminate language overwhelms her and she is struck by a grasping desire to solidify meaning—no matter how tenuous.

Much as the magistrate "swoop[s] and circle[s] around the irreducible figure of the [barbarian] girl," readers and critics find themselves "casting one net of meaning after another" over this enigmatic text, trying to make sense of it (81). *Barbarians* can be read as a well-wrought post-colonial meditation on the unknowability of the other; an allegorical critique of torture practices in brutal regimes; a political outcry against South African apartheid veiled in an indeterminate language intended to elude censors; or an existential treatise on the limits of the individual's interpretive mind when reduced to animal appetites by imprisonment and inhumane treatment. It can be read productively within all of these frameworks, but by limiting one's approach to a single theoretical or interpretive lens, the plural and ultimately irreducible nature of the text is overlooked. For, as Coetzee himself argues in "The Novel Today":

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. (4)

Barbarians is not a "message with...a rhetorical or aesthetic covering" ("Novel" 4), and those who approach the novel with the intention of divining its meaning will likely fall into the same traps as the magistrate.

Just as the barbarian girl "yields to everything" (*Barbarians* 30), Coetzee's novel can be made to accommodate a variety of readings and theoretical approaches. But the elusiveness of the novel renders any single interpretation insufficient. Like the text, the barbarian girl remains closed off, "without aperture, without entry," and when Joll and the magistrate do glean significance from her body it derives from their own incomplete interpretive processes (42). Coetzee reveals Colonel Joll's interpretations as acts of authorship, rather than elucidation; the magistrate admits to "seducing [him]self into "meanings and correspondences" (44). Reading *Waiting for the Barbarians*, we take part in a comparable interpretive process, and in our attempts to create meaning from a text that resists authoritative interpretation, we often fall into parallel seductions.

Although we grasp for meaning and narrative closure in the novel, we often come away with a feeling similar to the one expressed by the magistrate at novel's end: "like a man who has lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (155).

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