NARRATIVE VOICES, DIALECTICS, AND THE FICTION OF NORMAN MAILER

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BACKGROUND

Critics at first found little value in Mailer's earlier and often dismissed shorter writings. Later many critics began to find social and political, even literary value, in what had been previously dismissed.[1] In this article, I will attempt a similar revaluation of Mailer's narrative strategies, which are varied to meet the needs of different fictions. They also enable Mailer to manage intertextual materials without creating difficult to read or overdetermined stories. These narrative strategies enable Mailer to connect the voices embedded in intricate ways with the theories that underlay his fiction. He also had to enable his readers to make these connections as well. Mailer's narrative intertextuality caused exasperation and delight among even his most dedicated readers. Few contemporary writers have created the complex narratives that enabled Mailer to include readers in a circle of dialogic discourse. His engaged public performances added dramatic depth to his creation of narrative voices. Although the resulting multiple-voiced and intertextual narratives continued to annoy readers who found his experiments taxing, his narrative experimentation did succeed in immersing his assumed readers in the complexities of modern cultures.

MAILER'S NARRATIVES

The essential task in understanding what we might call "Mailer's narrative challenge" is to confront the question of how he manages in his best fiction to embed social and political theory in his work without destroying

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the communicative impact of the narratives. This question brings us to Mailer's handling of narrative forms. His ability to tell stories permeated his public appearances and often was mixed into his writing. His storytelling, in turn, depended on Mailer's experiments with different forms of narration. His narrators were often able to bring together the paradoxical combination of theory and fiction into a unified story line. When successful, Mailer's dialogic fiction produced a corresponding interior dialogue within readers, one that enabled interactions between current intellectual theories and stories. It also presented theory in a context in which characters and places are probed with exacting the experiences that lie behind those theories.

The narratives themselves, and the narrators they include, became guides as Mailer and his readers tackled the problems that lay behind the desire to create a dialogic symmetry between theory and language. In fact, narrators in Mailer's fiction also carried a more challenging burden: they had, as with Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream*, to image or shadow public figures whose iconic identities connected narrators with the cultures within which they existed and the audience to whom they wished to communicate.[2] Rojack's bizarre behavior, however disconcerting to many readers, expressed Mailer's involvement with the journal *Dissent* and the publication of *The Village Voice*, which he helped found. Rojack's New York experience also brings readers in contact with the experiences represented in the novel itself. The images of the city, Rojack's often disjointed narrative, and Mailer's metaphorical connection between Rojack's personal and public experiences enabled readers to traverse the margins between embedded theory and experience's story. Mailer merged within one narrative the otherwise isolated voices of self and other. Richard Poirier captures this dialogic ability when he argues that "even when Mailer is his own subject he cannot be said to exist simply in the narrative that tells his story. It is to be found instead within a larger expressive structure of which his voice is only one part looking for other parts" (227).

VOICES WITH THE NARRATIVE

Rhetoric provides yet another perspective on Mailer's fiction. *The Armies of the Night* in this case provides the rhetorical entry point. In this journalistic novel, Mailer's narrator simultaneously replicates the persona of the probing and self-conscious intellectual with the iconic public performer. The result is a rhetorical *tour de force* in which the following elements were blended:

his dialogue with intellectual peers, his immersion in the language and gestures of the counter culture during the protest, and his appropriation of some of the methods of the news media, as he contributed news reports to various sources. These elements of journalistic fiction were juxtaposed with the narrator's theoretical discussions of the significance of this public event.[3] Even more intellectual and analytic descriptions of the night he spent in jail at the close of the demonstration followed the descriptions of the event. The experience of a disappointed revolutionary (the narrator himself) is combined within an extended monologue. This monologue represents the narrator's character through a range of voices, all related to his thoughts juxtaposed with his observations of the march. Taken together, this range of voices organized within one narrating character is able to tell the story of a significant historical event in a way that involves readers in subjective and objective perspectives on the march. Similar narrative voices, in a different form, can also be found in *The Executioner's Song* (1979). In this article, I will analyze Mailer's development of dialogic narrative, which was, in turn, based on his manipulation of voice.

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

Mailer's use of the traditional third person narrative was most visible in his first novel. But even in this more traditional narrative mode, Mailer developed subtle but important variations that enabled him to create a complex relationship between his narrator and his readers. This interplay of narrative voices enabled Mailer to embed within one semi-omniscient narrator two overriding perspectives on the Pacific Island campaign. One voice established the tone of an authoritative reporter's objective commentary on the battle to be staged on the island of Anopopei. The second voice reached a more theoretical/intellectual level that by implication expressed Mailer's perspective on war in general.

We shall begin by looking first at the opening paragraph of the novel, which immediately establishes the more objective or journalistic first-person voice.

> Nobody could sleep. When morning came, assault craft would be lowered and a first wave of troops would ride through the surf and charge ashore on the beach at Anopopei. All over the ship, all through the convoy, there was a knowledge that in a few hours some of them were going to be dead. (Mailer, *Naked* 3)

This narrator views the soldiers from a partially omniscient vantage point. This first narrative voice plays the role of uninvolved reporter who describes in a dispassionate way the troops as they come ashore. His description of the landing follows the contours of the island. He connects the troops both physically and psychologically to the landscape as they land amidst the island's surf and take in the beach, the forest, and the mountains beyond. For the remainder of the novel, the coexistence of scenic description and human or troop movement becomes the reader's dual perspective as well. The troops, minimized by this pristine natural environment, are described as insect-like as they move in small platoons.

This first narrator's reportorial voice quickly turns into the more philosophical and distanced voice that is captured by the second narrative voice. Operating within these two voices readers are able to experience both the personal involvement and the reflective distance provided by the narrator. The forces of nature, which expand as the plot moves forward, provide the initial challenge to the troops, even before they engage in combat. As we read further, these dual views expand. Later they are represented by Mount Anaka, the platoon's final challenge, which relates back to the surf and beach of the opening passage. The second voice also re-appears throughout the remainder of the novel.

Later in the novel we find more complex examples of the narrator's continued use of this dual-voiced perspective. At these later points the purpose behind the use of two voices in one narrator becomes clearer. At one point after a near fight between Red and Stanley, the narrator takes the story over in a more pronounced way: "Far in the distance they could see Mount Anaka rising above the island. It arched coldly and remotely from the jungle beneath it, lofting itself massively into the low-hanging clouds of the sky" (447). The narrator at this point brings the reader's eyes to the top of the mountain that dwarfed the men. At the same time, passages like this one inspire soldiers with thoughts that are larger than their individual perspectives: "Gallagher stared at it in absorption, caught by a sense of beauty he could not express. The idea, the vision he always held of something finer and neater and more beautiful than the moil in which he lived trembled now, pitched almost to a climax of words" (447). In this passage, the two narrative voices come together to allow the action of the troops to mesh with their environment. At the same time, what earlier in the novel was seen as separate now comes together in Gallagher's fleeting but powerful vision. Soldiers and the

terrain within which they will fight this battle are combined. First the challenges of nature occupy the troops. Later, as the novel progresses, the second philosophical voice becomes more involved. Readers begin to experience the rhetorical effects of the two narrating voices, one dramatically involved, the other more reflective.

This contrast of war and nature is expressed throughout the final stages of the novel. But, in the end, the narrator sides (as Mailer the writer most often does) with ambiguity; he refuses to allow either voice to dominate. This later intertwining of voices, which leaves readers within an ambivalent space, is most clearly present in a lengthy passage from *The Naked and the Dead* (586–598). Martinez, an expert scout, has been ordered by platoon captain Croft to survey a piece of island jungle to find whether or not any Japanese soldiers could be situated there. Here the narrator's mix of voices follows Martinez as he carries out his reconnaissance. The jungle becomes a character that exists alongside Martinez as he maneuvers through his mission.

> In twenty minutes he had reached the rock shelf where they [Japanese soldiers] had been ambushed. He squatted in the woods behind it and examined the ledge for several minutes before advancing again. And then behind the ledge he watched the field and the grove where the Japanese had fired at them. In the moonlight the field was a wan silver and the grove an impenetrable black-green far deeper than the blanched transparent shadows that surrounded it. Behind him and to his right he could feel the huge body of the mountain glowing oddly in the darkness like a vast monument illumined by spotlights. (587)

The play of natural image and color in this scene once again establishes the double narrative effect. The voice of the natural world surrounds but is not an organic part of Martinez's recon. He can feel but is not in any way relieved of his burden by the images and colors of the natural scene in which he finds himself. The narrator accentuates both the distance Martinez feels from his environment and the significant part it plays in his life as a soldier.

The men and their troubled backgrounds, their class-defined lives, and their impoverished situations on the island are presented in tragicomic ways; readers feel their weaknesses and strengths owed against the background of

Anopopei and Mount Anaka. This contrast between man and nature creates a physical empathy with Martinez, but it also establishes the deeper futility and heroism of the platoon. The soldiers occasionally experience flights of beauty and psychological escape. But these elevated moments of vision, often spurred by the overpowering beauty of Anopopei, remain ephemeral; the soldiers are always returned to stultifying routines and petty squabbles. They remain tied to their existence as parts in an all-encompassing war machine.

The fusing of narrative voices in *The Naked and the Dead* is implied rather than overtly identified. These two contrasting voices often makes Mailer's storytelling difficult to follow. But it is also this lack of narrative transparency that enables Mailer to establish the complexity of his cultural ideas.

The narrator's first voice describes Martinez's superiority when compared with the rest of the platoon. His calm external temperament, expert scouting abilities, and willingness to follow orders set him apart from the rest of the platoon. The narrator's more theoretical second voice consistently interrupts the external description of Martinez; it draws the reader into Martinez's inner turmoil. We come to see Martinez through the lens that describes him as he carries out his reconnaissance. The first voice is also focused on the soldiers in the field. The second narrator remains in the background implying a more philosophical perspective. Note in the following passage from the novel how Mailer uses the second narrative voice to offset the image of the heroic Martinez. Only when readers, toward the end of the novel, match Martinez's inner struggles with the second narrator's implied commentary, do they feel the irony of war—its enveloping absurdity and its effect on individual soldiers.

> Automatically he took a step backward, and heard someone else turning over in his blankets. He did not dare to move for fear of swiping a branch and arousing them. For at least a minute he was wholly paralyzed. He felt it impossible to turn back. He could not have explained it; his fear of retreating from the grove was great but it was not so intense as his terror at the thought of moving forward. (592)

Here we find the second narrative voice acting in the role of omniscient observer. Whereas the first voice provides an on-the-ground perspective, it is the combination of the two voices that creates the narrative tension. Readers come

to feel Martinez's ambiguity; courageous on the ground, he evinces a deeper psychological fear of the consequences of his actions. But the second voice by implication brings to the reader's mind the tension between the implacable Martinez earlier in the novel and the terrorized Martinez seemingly trapped in the jungle and surrounded by a Japanese platoon later in the novel. This tension also enables Mailer to develop his perspective on the absurdity of war.

THE OFFICERS

Most of the attention to character in *The Naked and the Dead* is focused on ground troops. But Mailer does use a similar dual narrative strategy in presenting General Cumming's distanced and abstract perspective on the battle. Use of this strategy enables Mailer to highlight the contrast between Cummings and the soldiers.

The officers, at one rank or another, are plagued by a military bureaucracy that rewards good fortune and manipulation more than it does effort or talent. The narrator in these cases uses irony to create distance between the officers and the readers. We focus on the more superficial ambitions and elitist poses of General Cummings along with his leadership qualities. In fact, the leadership qualities actually support the second narrative voice's ironic treatment of the general's leadership. Those at the highest leadership levels act as if they are playing a war game rather than truly engaging in the war itself. The general's tactics and strategies have direct effect on his management of the war effort; the officers play the game to win battles for their own benefit, and to fulfill their own ambitions. Behind the irony that is focused on General Cummings, who is certainly not incapable or unintelligent, the narrator implies a second perspective on war. But it is not focused on the General alone. Rather it is now focused on the larger issue: that all wars include this divide between those who manage and those who fight wars. This broader perspective is symbolized but not limited to the implications of Mailer's treatment of General Cummings. This second narrative voice shadows the officer's and soldiers' narratives. It develops into what becomes the most significant message of the novel as a whole—that wars are fought by two groups, the experienced and involved foot soldiers, and the smart but out-of-touch officers. Taken simply, this message is clichéd; taken through Mailer's complex narrative lens, it is complex.

To carry this interpretation further, we need once again to look closely at

General Cummings. The general himself is also presented from two ironic perspectives. On the surface level, the narrator ironically portrays the general's more playful, unfeeling side.

> It [the movement of the patrols] was simple, a lark. After months of standing guard at night, of patrolling up trails which could explode into ambush at any moment, the mopping up was comparatively pleasant, almost exciting. The killing lost all dimension, bothered the men far less than discovering some ants in their bedding. (718)

War is at least partly impersonal, even among the soldiers who fight on the ground, but the irony in this passage is focused on the general who, from an intellectual and spatial distance, perceives the tactical advantage of exploiting the troops. Having worked through many tedious and nerve-racking patrols, the troops are far more experienced in their everyday movements and behaviors than the officers, but have no say in planning or managing the movements of the divisions. The patrol itself is merely a pawn in the general's chess game. It is a game the general plays on a strategic level, never experiencing the effects of his plans on the troops in the field. The only exception to this operational convention occurs when Croft, the quintessential soldier and survivor of the battle of Anopopei, makes decisions based on consequences to his troops. In the end, Croft's leadership role is limited and ineffective, and the rift between the officer's management and the soldiers' blind following of orders remains. But where in our discussion do we find evidence of the second narrative voice? The following passage, in which a third person, unidentified narrator describes Cumming's attempts to manipulate the military bureaucracy, provides at least a partial answer.

> Cummings put in a busy week after Hearn was transferred to Dalleson's section. The final and major assault on the Toyaku Line, which Cummings had been postponing for almost a month, had become virtually a necessity. The character of the messages he had been receiving from Corps and Army permitted no further delay and Cummings had his informants in higher echelons as well; he knew he would have to produce some success in the next week or two. His staff had developed the at-

> tack plan through its final variations and details, and the assault was scheduled to start in three days. (380)

Cummings is described by the second narrator as an automaton caught within the web of military command. But even the general's specific planning had its sources in commands from above. General Cummings in his own way is as much a puppet as the men on the ground. This more deeply ironic treatment of Cummings enables Mailer's narrator to stretch his perspective from individual characters to a larger perspective on the absurdity of war. The more abstract voice moves from shadow to surface and from surface to shadow.

These narrative voices establish an overall irony that is able to move in two directions. The more ironic second voice provides insight into the overblown egos of the officers. It also displays their psychological insecurities, their often silly and elitist gestures, and their mean-spirited treatment of those who rank below them. It also, in a subordinate way, captures the leadership roles played by officers. This kind of existential irony allows this second voice to provide readers with two simultaneous ways of seeing. One provides a surface view of the soldiers who fight the war and enables readers to see the challenges they face. The other is more distanced and enables readers to see the overall absurdity of war. This double-edged voice also characterizes the narrator's view of the general. Readers have already experienced a more distant and comic view of the general as he looks down upon the soldiers whom he describes as "ants." The second perspective, both more ironic and more foreboding, shows the general as he ponders his own inability to comprehend his role in leading the war effort and, perhaps more significantly, the futility and chaos of combat in general: "For a moment he almost admitted that he had had very little or perhaps nothing at all to do with this victory, or indeed any victory—it had been accomplished by a random play of vulgar good luck larded into a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend" (716). Cummings ironically recognizes his own uselessness. But the irony goes a step further. As readers, we experience another ironic level in which the general's incompetence is seen in the shadow of the suffering of the common soldiers. We find the workings of two narrative voices operating simultaneously. This combination of two voices, existing within a single narrative structure, creates the resonant and tragic qualities of Mailer's view of war. His vision of war comes to readers through a cluster of experiences built around frustrations that occur

when the larger and more admirable goals usually connected with war are lost among the fateful events, tragic circumstances, and frustrated egos of soldiers and officers alike.

AN AMERICAN DREAM

The most effective way of establishing Mailer's narrative methods is to compare his use of narrative strategies in one of his more experimental novels with the partially omniscient narrator of *The Naked and the Dead*. Written at mid-career, *An American Dream* moves away from the semi-omniscient narration of *The Naked and the Dead* to a first-person narrator who is entirely immersed in the experience of the story. Half Mailer, half ego-driven character in his own right, Stephen Rojack becomes the conduit through which dynamic and dangerous realities in 1960s New York City become the shadow looming over American urban cultural change.[4] These cultural paradoxes are established early in the novel. Shortly after Rojack's murder of Deborah, and during his interview with tough-minded Lieutenant Roberts, Rojack considers three ways in which he might respond to the murder of his wife. He could confess right away and receive a sentence of 20 years. Or he could wait until all the evidence was in and confess later, when he would be likely to receive a life sentence. Finally, he might go back to relying on his intelligence and courage to avoid taking responsibility for his actions and to escape punishment. Rojack, consistent with his character, chooses the latter. In the following passage, Rojack responds to Roberts' description of his situation in a paradoxical way.

> But I was sorry he [Roberts] was gone. It had been easier somehow when he had been there. Now there was nothing to do but think of what he had said. I was trying to calculate how much time had gone by from that moment I recognized Deborah was dead until she struck the ground on the East River Drive. . . . I had had a knowledge of anatomy once, but now I had no idea how long the cells might remain intact, nor how soon they might begin to decompose. (Mailer, *American* 79)

This passage establishes Rojack's fear of the consequences of his violent outburst. He describes with figurative and technical language Deborah's ten-flight fall. Perhaps more important in figuring out Rojack's character is the

emphasis he places on feelings of isolation. Despite his bravado, he wishes that Roberts, his supposed antagonist, would keep him company. This choice comes to haunt him through the rest of the novel. It also expresses his rational, intellectual, and, in this case, insensitive responses to his wife's death. The defining act in Rojack's paradoxical responses to Deborah's death occurs when he labels her death a suicide. This decision enables him to offset the guilt and loneliness he feels in reaction to the murder. Yet, we must recall that, despite Rojack's crude and sometimes disdainful response to Deborah's death, he had responded to her demise with an involuntary sob earlier in the novel. The first voice in the narrative of *An American Dream* provides a complex set of perspectives that readers can use in defining Rojack's character. By scattering references throughout the novel to these several perspectives on Rojack's character, Mailer's narrator establishes a multiple-voiced context in which an aura of moral ambiguity is established.

A second voice resonates with the first in this novel as well. This voice provides readers with a comic perspective on Rojack and the entire story. The narrator speaks in two simultaneous voices, one focused on Rojack's character, the other on a language that brings the reader outside Rojack and into a more distant perspective. He describes his wife in the following passage:

> She had, at her best, a winner's force, and when she loved me (which may be averaged out somewhere between every other day to one day in three) her strength seemed then to pass to mine and I was live with wit, I had vitality, I could depend on stamina, I possessed my style. It was that the gift was only up for loan. The instant she stopped loving me—which could be for a fault so severe as failing to open the door with a touch of éclat, thereby reminding her of all the swords, humors, and arbiters who had opened doors for her on better nights—why then my psyche was whisked from the stage and stuffed in a pit. (18)

This blend of comic understatement and exaggeration clarifies the method Mailer uses to ensure that readers hear two voices. One is mostly serious—underneath the narrative lies an individual who feels, in an honest, if somewhat self-indulgent way, the rebuffs of an elegant wife who is most likely classier than her mate. The surface of the narrative presents the second voice. This voice is fraught with comic and satiric figurations that create a very dif-

ferent view of Rojack. The interpretation of both voices creates just the right distance in the reader's responses to Rojack, a distance that captures the simplicity, innocence, and malevolence of his character.

At a deeper universal level, Mailer's narrative voices move readers toward an understanding of the dynamic human drama of urban life. Rojack is never able to fully recover from his wife's death, but he is able to rationalize away his responsibility for her death. Rojack should make us realize that Mailer, for all his interest in extreme human behavior, is in essence a moralist. In Mailer's novels, ambivalence often effaces moral choice.[5] He must place his decisions within the context of existential ambiguities. Yet he must make those decisions knowing, recognizing, and accepting responsibility for making what are in the end moral decisions. Rojack, despite all rationalizations, was a murderer. He relied only on his ego and intelligence and was never able to decide on what basis he might judge his behavior. Mailer, in a 1964 letter to Eiichi Yamanishi, his Japanese translator, suggested that *An American Dream* was also "unusual in its psychic world, and may in this sense go further than any novel I know" (*Norman* 54). This psychic world includes a moral dimension that lies behind much of Mailer's fiction.

THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT

The Armies of the Night provides an even more overt example of Mailer's use of narrative voices that are pitched between public performance and intellectual engagement. Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night*, which was also published during the turmoil of the late sixties, presents a narrator who is directly immersed in the drama of the march on the pentagon. To ensure that this novel is not read as a report or straight historical account, Mailer once again creates a first-person narrator who speaks to readers through two voices. The first is a narrating persona who is caught up in the march; he provides a journalistic account of the events in which he is participating. This reportorial voice is mixed with a second voice that complicates the more direct descriptions of the march. Again we have an example of a narrator whose combined voices create a dialectic that includes author, narrator, and reader in an expansive reading event. Mailer's first-person narrator expands his range to include an interpretive voice that focuses on the broader significance of the event. Note the amount of reflection and interpretation this second voice injects into the discussion of reasons for defending or arguing against the Vietnam War: "He knew the arguments for the war, and against

the war—finally they bored him. The arguments in support of the war were founded on basic assumptions which had not been examined and were endlessly repeated—the arguments to withdraw never pursued the consequences" (Mailer, *Armies* 202–03).

At this point Henry Adams comes to mind. In contrast to *The Armies of the Night*, Adams uses the third person in *The Education of Henry Adams* to combine the roles of assumed author and third person narrator. This technique provides the double emphasis of participant and observer of historical events that Adams wants his readers to experience. In contrast, Mailer wants to include in his more dramatic historical-literary account of the march a more invasive and active persona. Through this persona the narrator of *The Armies of the Night* becomes not simply an observer of his own actions, but also an agent in moving the march forward. Mailer, defending his narrative technique, argued that non-fiction requires a narrator who acts as an "eyewitness" and who is "not a vested partisan . . . he must be not only involved, but ambiguous . . . a comic hero" (65). In his essays on boxing Mailer employed a similar double-voiced narrative, where boxer, the context within which the boxer exists, and the assumed author who wishes to find the cultural reasons behind the ongoing interest in boxing dialogue within a tense and sometimes competitive environment. Mailer, always the competitor, found ways to create narratives that were also competitive in nature. But the competitiveness always had a dialogic purpose.

Harold Bloom once suggested that "Mailer . . . doubtless will vanish into neglect, and yet always will return, as a historian of the moral consciousness of his era, and as the representative writer of his generation" (6). For Mailer there are no conclusive points of view. His morality is existential not teleological; it is focused on process rather than final purposes. Meaning occurs as insights are gathered and accumulated while reading. They are always moving rather than static targets. Worthwhile meanings are never easily achieved.

NOTES

1. See in particular *Advertisements for Myself* and "The White Negro."
2. Mailer himself addressed in different terms the difficulty of bringing together the voices of literary and interpretive narrative. Note the centrality of the word *consciousness* in this quotation: "The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" ("First Advertisement" 17).

3. It is appropriate to note that Mailer never accepted Truman Capote's or Tom Wolfe's claims that the new journalism had resulted in the creation of a new genre, the non-fiction novel. Mailer felt there was actually no difference between non-fiction and fiction. Part of Mailer's argument seems rooted in his consistent claim that the multi-voice and dialogic novels of the eighteenth century established a foundation for the novel as an expression of diverse social range and supported by the contention that the novel had always been an all-inclusive genre. See Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination.*
4. This statement in no way contradicts the fact that *An American Dream* is also a comic novel.
5. I tend to agree with interpretations that emphasize Rojack's guilt. Others find Rojack overwhelmed by the circumstances he finds himself in; they also emphasize the ambiguous ways in which the narrator describes Deborah's fall. Richard Poirier, in *Trying it Out in America: Literary and Other Performances*, argues that "even when Mailer is his own subject . . . he cannot be said to exist simply in the narrative that tells his story but is to be found instead within a larger expressive structure of which his voice is only one part looking for other parts" (227). Poirier here describes a broad but no less convincing view of the kind of dialogic tension I am attributing to *An American Dream.*

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