

Stephen Regan

University of Durham

The Poetry of Seamus Heaney and the Ambiguous Politics of the Ceasefire

Just a few days after the IRA ceasefire was announced on 31 August 1994, Seamus Heaney (*Sunday Tribune*, 4 September 2004) wrote a short article for the *Dublin Sunday Tribune*. It begins in a very positive mood: "The announcement by the Provisional IRA last Wednesday changed everything for the better." The effect of that announcement, he says, was like having a blind lifted in his head:

I went outside to try to re-collect myself and suddenly a blind seemed to rise somewhere at the back of my mind and the light came flooding in. I felt twenty-five years younger. I remembered what things had felt like in those early days of political ferment in the late sixties.

But that feeling of being "freed up," as Heaney puts it, turns to anger as he ponders twenty-five years of suffering that have brought the situation to a point that is actually less politically promising than things were in 1968. Even so, the tentative optimism encouraged by the ceasefire is evident a little later in Heaney's Nobel Prize speech in 1995, in which he speaks of "acts of faith" around the world that "inspire a hope that a new possibility can still open up in Ireland as well" (1998: 460–1).

With the exception of Edna Longley's sobering essay, "Northern Irish Poetry and the End of History" (2000: 280), very little attention has been paid to the ways in which writers in Northern Ireland have responded to the peace process. Longley is well used to journalists from abroad asking writers in Belfast, "What are you going to write about now?" "One reply," she suggests, is that poetry "had never depended either on one theme or on one orchestration of that theme." Even so, some crucially important questions need to be addressed about the perceived change of political climate registered in the recent poetry of writers like Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon. Edna Longley's own incisive readings of works produced by these poets since 1994 suggest that "the collective script might be changing," even though she remains wary of simple formulations such as "post-ceasefire literature" (2000: 315). The various interruptions and deadlocks and the general intransigence of

the peace process have tended to undermine the initial promise and hopefulness of 1994, but the possibility of substantial political progress in a more peaceful domain has prompted reflections and imaginings that seem to indicate a new poetic consciousness. One manifestation of this is an impulse among poets (especially Seamus Heaney) to revisit and revise their own creative achievements. Edna Longley (2000: 316) notes "the accentuated tendency for poets to quote and revise not only earlier poets and each other but also their former textual selves." In terms of a distinctive preoccupation with memory, forgiveness and reconciliation, and in terms of a sustained intertextual experimentation, it might be argued that there is a significant body of writing that is "post-ceasefire" in more than just the obvious chronological sense.

The image of light flooding into Seamus Heaney's poems is anticipated, of course, in a good deal of his writing prior to 1994. This is especially true of the poems in *Seeing Things*, published in 1991, in which Heaney turns away from a "poetry sluggish in the doldrums of what happens," towards the visionary mode suggested by the title of the volume. In the poem "Fosterling," he writes of "waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans / The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten" (1991: 50). There is no doubt that Heaney's work has recently come out into the light and that it has started to shed the heavy layers of discomfort that have been there since the early 1970s. For Heaney's detractors, of course, this apparent lightening does not really matter. His poetry, they would have us believe, has always been supremely evasive of the actual stuff of politics, encrypting it in Celtic and Norse mythology and presenting it with such serene even-handedness and subtle obliquity as to say very little at all. The title of Heaney's poem, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," has frequently been turned back on him with an accusing stare. To appreciate fully the recent lightening in Heaney's work, and the extent to which it has been a matter of intense creative struggle, we need to recall those moments of darkness and near-despair that made the title of his 1969 book *Door into the Dark* seem ironically prophetic. We need to remember, too, those occasions on which Heaney has been moved to speak out forcefully against the British media, the British government and the British army.

In March 1988, Heaney was invited to London to receive the *Sunday Times* award for excellence in writing. He used what might otherwise have been a pleasantly emollient occasion to express his deep dismay at the British media coverage of events in Northern Ireland, which threatened to undermine recent attempts to establish an Anglo-Irish political agreement:

I noticed in yesterday's newspapers an inclination to view the British army presence in Ulster once again as part of the solution rather than part of the problem, an inclination to view them as hygienic, rubber-gloved, impersonally motivated technicians operating in polluted ghettos where indigenous hatreds are cultured in self-induced and self-wounding conditions. I noticed an inclination to think of military funerals as a tribal and undesirable form of solidarity when enacted on the Falls Road, but as somehow immunised against tribal significance when the victims were British soldiers, the mourners were British parents, and the martial music was relayed with deeply emotive effect by the news channels of British television.

(Heaney 1989: 14)

Heaney's bold and uncompromising stance on this occasion was informed by Robert Lowell's assertion that "every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments," (qtd. in *Time* 11 June, 1965) but the example of Yeats was also in his mind: "Yeats's challenge to the writer was to hold in a single thought reality and justice, and the same challenge is in effect in Westminster and Fleet Street" (1989: 14). We cannot embark upon a worthwhile appraisal of Heaney's post-ceasfire writings without giving adequate measure to the gravity and seriousness that weigh upon his earlier writings, and without taking into account what he memorably characterises elsewhere as his own "responsible *tristia*" (1998: 43). That *tristia* is gently self-ironising, but it adequately points to a pervasive mood and a sense of moral obligation that persist in Heaney's work over a period of some twenty years.

Heaney's 1993 lecture, "Frontiers of Writing" (the closing piece in *The Redress of Poetry*), recalls an Oxford college dinner that took place a week after the death of Bobby Sands, on the same day that another hunger striker, the son of a neighbouring family of the Heaneys in Co. Derry, was being buried. As the poet circulates among the sherry-sipping crowd, he thinks of a very different crowd in a small house, close to home, where a funeral is taking place. He recognises acutely a "moment of conflicting recognitions, self-division, inner quarrel, a moment of dumbness and inadequacy when it felt like a betrayal to be enjoying the hospitality of an Establishment college and occupying, if only accidentally, the room of a British minister." What he experiences at that moment is "the classic bind of all of Northern Ireland's constitutional nationalists," caught between "commitments to cultural and political ideals which are fundamentally Ireland-centred" and "their disavowal of support for the violent means of the Irish Republican Army, an army which operates with pre-emptive and atrocious force in order to further similar cultural and political ideals." Heaney's acknowledgement of the "frontier" and its political, as well

as imaginative, consequences is candid but also unflinchingly forthright: "But whether the north and the south are to be regarded as monolithic or pluralist entities, the fact of the border, of partition, of two Irelands on one island, remains the salient fact" (1995: 188–9). There are other occasions on which Heaney has made his political sympathies and attachments explicit, and his prose writings have been scrupulously frank about their own aesthetic and ideological procedures. To understand the complex shifts that have taken place in Heaney's writings since the ceasefire, however, we need to go back even further to 1972.

In an essay titled "1972" and published in the *Guardian* that year, Heaney asks how poetry can come to terms with the violence and brutality of the times. He ponders these lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 65: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" (1980: 33). In a later essay in 1974, Heaney (1980: 57) answers that question with the help of Yeats. What he must do, as Yeats does in his "Meditations in Time of Civil War," is to find "befitting emblems of adversity": images and symbols that are somehow adequate to the predicament. Those emblems of adversity have steadily given way to emblems of reconciliation and renewal in recent times, but their force and significance are still apparent in Heaney's most recent poems.

The most striking emblems of adversity in the 1970s can be found in the Bog Poems of *Wintering Out* and *North*, in which Heaney establishes a parallel between the sectarian killings going on in his own north and the ritual sacrifices to Mother Earth in the early Iron Age culture across northern Europe. The source for this pervasive anthropological interest was P. V. Glob's illustrated book, *The Bog People*, published in English in 1969. Heaney (1980: 57–8) writes that "the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles." Among the first of the bog poems to be written was "The Tollund Man," which begins with the announcement of a pilgrimage, a desire to visit the peat bogs of Jutland: "Some day I will go to Aarhus." The most striking aspect of this and other bog poems is the strange fusing of Christian and pagan ritual. In the third stanza, the meditative line, "I will stand a long time," suggests a veneration and a reverence usually reserved for the Stations of the Cross, and the second section of the poem explicitly acknowledges that to pray to a pagan saint is to "risk blasphemy." The closing stanza of the poem recognises the paradox of internal exile, of being an inner émigré: "Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (1998: 65).

One of the first poems to be written by Heaney after the announcement of the ceasefire at the end of August 1994 was "Tollund," the penultimate poem in Heaney's 1996 book, *The Spirit Level*. The poem is dated September 1994, as if announcing its presence in a new political dispensation. At the same time, it looks back at "The Tollund Man," gently suggesting a changed world view in its delicate verbal echoes of the earlier poem. As the new title suggests, the focus now is less on the fossilised sacrificial object than on the broader prospect of the place itself, with its promising "path through Jutland fields." The penitential journey envisaged in the earlier poem has now been undertaken; but most importantly, the speaker's solitary and uncertain veneration in "The Tollund Man" ("I will stand a long time") now gives way to a sense of shared destiny and communion: "That Sunday morning we had travelled far. / We stood a long time out in Tollund Moss" (1998: 443). The familiar yet "hallucinatory" quality of the place prepares us for the prospect of "seeing things," for the possibility of the miraculous.

One way in which Heaney is prompted to see a bright utopian vision is through a subtle recall of "Townland of Peace," part of a sequence titled "Freehold," written in the 1940s by the Ulster regionalist poet, John Hewitt: "It could have been a still out of the bright / 'Townland of Peace', that poem of dream farms / Outside all contention" (1998: 443). In "The Tollund Man," Heaney had established a parallel between ancient Jutland and the "old man-killing parishes" of his own homeland. Now, he establishes a different parallel between the quiet pastoral of the Jutland fields and Hewitt's wartime regional idyll, in which the poet imagines stepping "clean out of Europe into peace." As Edna Longley (2000: 307) suggests, "'Townland of Peace' may have come into Heaney's mind because its images distinguish peace from war so simply and clearly, and because it explains how wartime circumstances stimulated the visionary new history for 'Ulster ... my region' that emerges later in 'Freehold.'" At the same time, Heaney's new vision of "Tollund" is one that is open to change and modernisation. His pastoral setting admits "Light traffic sound," and the generously embracing image of a scarecrow with its arms open is strategically aligned with a satellite dish in a nearby paddock. A standing stone has been "resituated and landscaped," and the speaker who once felt lost among foreign names now discovers "tourist signs in *futhark* runic script / In Danish and in English." All the signs suggest that "Things had moved on" (1998: 443).

The earlier negative identification that Heaney articulates in "The Tollund Man," feeling "lost, / Unhappy and at home," now gives way to a more easeful and open sense of being "at home beyond the tribe." The dejected solitariness

of the earlier poem is replaced with a more positive sense of companionship and shared endeavour:

More scouts than strangers, ghosts who'd walked abroad
 Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning.
 And make a go of it, alive and sinning,
 Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad. (1998: 443)

The image of ghosts is momentarily unsettling, since the haunted present usually signifies the troubled legacy of the past, but the facing of the light is a positive indication of a new start and a new determination to go forward, unconstrained by the narrow moral and religious dictates that have previously hindered progress. The willingness to take risks in the interests of change has a formal corollary in Heaney's readiness to employ the rhythms of living speech: "make a go of it [...] not bad" (1998: 443). Edna Longley (2000: 309) notes that the phrase "Ourselves again" appears to conflate the familiar translation of *Sinn Féin* ("ourselves alone") with the famous Irish ballad, "A Nation Once Again," and she concludes: "Perhaps it is fitting that subtextual irresolution should characterise an 'end' that cannot yet generate the language, the tropes and modes, for 'a new beginning.'" Andrew Murphy (1996: 103), however, offers a more optimistic reading of these closing lines, noting that "By cancelling the 'alone' and replacing it with 'again,' Heaney suggests a kind of rebirth of Irishness and a breaking of traditional isolationist introversion." The closing colloquial summation, "not bad," is just deflationary enough to caution against wild expectations; it suggests a reasonable start, but it also invites a more generous estimation of human kindness and potential than had previously prevailed.

The most remarkable manifestation of the Tollund Man in recent times, however, has been in "The Tollund Man in Springtime," a sonnet sequence included in *District and Circle* (2006). As the title of the sequence suggests, the longed-for germination that Heaney sought in *Wintering Out* has now come about and the Tollund Man walks abroad in the rapidly changing contemporary world. The new global order that he inhabits is one in which terrorism is a persistent and widespread concern, and in which new technology drives the increasing need for surveillance. If this seems like a disappointing, dystopian end to all that was hoped for in the earlier poem – as if the violence and terror at the local level have now assumed a worldwide presence – there is also an abiding hope and determination. The persistence of the Tollund Man testifies to the survival and persistence of poetry itself, and now the Tollund Man speaks in his own voice, with a new-found sense of liberation:

Into your virtual city I'll have passed
 Unregistered by scans, screens, hidden eyes,
 Lapping myself in time, an absorbed face
 Coming and going, neither god nor ghost ...

(2006: 53)

The strong sense of endurance and fortitude that informs the poem derives in part from the anti-totalitarian vision of Heaney's friend and fellow poet, Czesław Miłosz, who died in August 2004: "The soul exceeds its circumstances." The presence of the Polish poet reinforces the impression that "The Tollund Man in Springtime" is a celebration of poetry's "staying powers." By the end of the sequence, it seems as if poet and Tollund Man have merged and become one. If the title *District and Circle* brings to mind the London Underground and the hellish circumstances of the terrorist bombings in July 2005, it also suggests Heaney's continuing preoccupation with his own district and his relentless circling back on his own poetic achievements. There is resilience and endurance in the figure of the turf cutter with which the sequence ends: "I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit / And spirited myself into the street" (2006: 58).

Stylistically, too, "The Tollund Man in Springtime" registers a changed world view. For all the deep-seated anxieties that attend the prospect of globalised terror, there is a lightness and deftness in Heaney's handling of the sonnet form. The syntactical fluency and rhythmic buoyancy of the sonnets suggest a recovery of confidence in the lyric mode. In the opening sonnet, for instance, the Petrarchan rhyme scheme is established with an easeful and artful simplicity, allowing words like "passed" and "ghost," "lost" and "rust," to function as near-echoes of each other, rather than as full-throated rhymes. This sustained experimentation with lyric form takes on a new confidence and adventurousness in the changed political climate of the post-ceasefire period. Between 1972 and 1994, between "The Tollund Man" and "Tollund," Heaney had continued to think about the function of poetry, and about whether lyric poetry, in particular, was adequate to the circumstances in which it now had to operate. One of the most revealing instances of Heaney's theoretical manoeuvring can be found in the Richard Ellmann Lectures which he delivered at Emory University in Atlanta in 1988, and which were subsequently printed in a small book titled *The Place of Writing* (1989). In these lectures, Heaney (1989: 38) confesses just how difficult it is to carry on writing in a cultural climate where a suspicion of Yeatsian heroics combines with a more general European scepticism about the possibilities of poetry after Auschwitz:

it all added up to a situation in which the literary intelligentsia of Britain and Ireland were anxious to confine the operations of imaginative writing to a sanitized realm that might include the ludic, the ironic, the parodic, the satiric, the pathetic, the domestic, the elegiac and the self-inculpatory, but which would conscientiously exclude the visionary prophetic, the patriotic witness, the national epical.

In Heaney's own work, of course, there are many instances of the domestic, the elegiac and the self-inculpatory, but rather less attention has been given to the visionary prophetic, the patriotic witness and the national epical, all of which are also abundantly present in Heaney's work, and which arguably begin to surface more confidently and explicitly in the poetry written after the ceasefire of 1994. The references to "the ludic, the ironic, the parodic" derive in part from the preface to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison, in which Heaney (somewhat reluctantly) had been included in 1982. It suggests the kind of poetry then being written by Paul Muldoon, a poetry that was advertising itself as postmodern in its self-reflexive, allusive, deconstructive energies. Just a little later in the essay, Heaney (1989: 41) takes Muldoon to task for seeming to "deride the notion that poetry might have a desirable, never mind a demonstrable, relation to the life of a nation. To get involved with such ideas, he [Muldoon] implies, is at best to commit a literary offence, at worst to promote dubious mystiques involving race memory and the chosen people complex." How, then, to steer a line between patriotic witness and the kind of postmodern playfulness that would seem to abandon any serious commitment to the life of the nation? Heaney has always tried to balance the place of writing in terms of a particular national location with the place of writing in terms of where it exists, theoretically, in relation to other cultural activities and events.

Three poems written by Heaney over a period of thirty years, all of them preoccupied with a particular place – Toome, in Co. Antrim – suggest how pervasive and persistent Heaney's ideas about the "place of writing" have been throughout his career. All three poems give voice to the urge and necessity of poetry itself, but also reveal distinctive stages of development in Heaney's thinking about the adequacy of his own artistic impulses. The first of these poems, simply titled "Toome," appeared in *Wintering Out* in 1972. It is one of a number of sensuous verbal realisations of local places, including "Anahorish" and "Broagh," in which Heaney taps a long Irish tradition of placename poems (*dinnseanchas*) and attempts to recover "forgotten Gaelic music in the throat": "My mouth holds round / the soft blastings, / Toome, Toome." At

a phonetic level, the poem is an exploration of the distinctive music of Gaelic vowel sounds; it exerts a sense of kinship and perhaps a sense of possession in the mouth's prolonged "holding" to the soundings of the place. As Heaney suggests in his early essays, however, linguistic contours are also geo-political contours. Toome is part of the Bann valley, a site of important archaeological discoveries (and therefore an appropriate place for poetic excavations involving language and memory), but it is also associated with the 1798 Rebellion, and especially with the folk memory, preserved in Ethna Carbery's song, of the rebel Roddy McCorley: "For young Roddy McCorley goes to die on the Bridge of Toome today" (Regan 2004: 367). The "soft blastings" of *Toome* open up the poem's excavation of the landscape, while subtly hinting at its troubled political history. Heaney's poetic "prospecting" uncovers, instead of gold, an assortment of objects, including "musket-balls." The final prospect is a place of danger, where the speaker acknowledges the risks that accompany his archaeological excavations: "I am sleeved in / alluvial mud that shelves / suddenly under / bogwater and tributaries, / and elvers tail my hair" (1998: 53). That final image is a Celtic version of the Medusa myth that suggests that Heaney has pushed back well beyond the 1790s into pagan Ireland. If it provides evidence that Heaney has "located his primeval, preliterate self," it also reminds us of the fossilising, petrifying consequences of looking too intently into the past (Morrison 1982: 44).

"The Toome Road" provides a striking indication of the colloquial vigour and directness that started to enter Heaney's work between *Wintering Out* in 1972 and *Field Work* in 1979. That stylistic shift is immediately apparent in the poem's opening recollection of a meeting with the British Army:

One morning early I met armoured cars
 In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
 All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
 And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets. (1998: 150)

The echoes of English folk song ("Early one morning, just as the sun was rising") are quickly dispelled, and the image of a singing maiden is displaced by military hardware. In its surveillance of rural Ulster, the army also appears to have displaced the birds and even the trees in which they sing. The broken alder, the darling tree of the exiled Sweeney, is an ominous sign. In Heaney's version of *Buile Suibhne* (*Sweeney Astray*, 1983), the alder has "some milk of human kindness / coursing in its sap" (1983: 37), but here that innocence has been destroyed. The voice of the poem modulates in response to the perceived

invasion, asserting territorial rights: "How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?" (1998: 150). If the voice is that of a local farmer, it is also the oracular voice of the poet, speaking with the full authority of the author, through and on behalf of the community, and emulating the defiant idiom of Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

Even as the conceit of the military convoy as a grotesque debasement of nature is extended, the poem refuses to conceal its violent actuality. If the occupants of the armoured cars are "Sowers of seed," they are also "erectors of headstones." The lyrical address, "O charioteers," is strangely anachronistic, but its function is to expose rather than obscure political power. As Neil Corcoran (1986: 134) points out, "the British soldiers become, briefly, continuous with the forces of the Roman imperium." That backward historical look might seem to deflect from the urgent needs of the moment, but it nevertheless presents the British army as an aggressive, occupying presence. The poem gathers to a climax as it sets against the passing image of violence an enduring image of artistic inspiration: "The invisible, untopped omphalos." The Greek omphalos is a crucially important word in Heaney's lexicon, as it is in that of James Joyce. It appears as the first word in the opening essay of Heaney's first collection of essays, *Preoccupations*, associating the navel and the centre of the world with the sound of water being pumped in the yard of the farm where he grew up in Co. Derry. The claim that it "stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass" is a defiant recognition of art's resistance to brutal pressures, and a bold acknowledgement of all that poetry stands for.

From the outset, the poet's imagination has set the assuaging rhythms of water being pumped in the yard – "*omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*" – against a troubling military incursion. The child growing up in the 1940s hears "American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge," while "American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road" (1980: 17). In *Electric Light* (2001), Heaney returns to the early places of the imagination, but with a new sense of energy and insight. The opening poem, "At Toomebridge," gathers up Heaney's earlier interests in local topography and replays them with a new suddenness and a new sense of the marvellous:

Where the flat water
 Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh
 As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth
 And fallen shining to the continuous
 Present of the Bann.

The title and the repeated anaphoric emphasis on “where” (four times in a poem of ten lines) are strong indicators of a persistent interest in places and placenames in Heaney’s work. The technique of finding verbal equivalents for features of the landscape is reminiscent of the earlier “Toome,” while the speaker’s excited apprehension of the world recalls some of the early poems in *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*. Even so, there is a distinct and decisive change of perspective. The typographical indentation and the syntactical disconnectedness create the impression that the poem has been extracted from some larger sequence. The movement of water sets up a complex interplay of spatial and temporal effects, as if enacting the processes of memory and imagination as they explore the contours of the earth. The poem acknowledges both the Heraclitean flux that Gerard Manley Hopkins revelled in and the persistent, ineffaceable stuff of history, including the remembrance of “Where the rebel boy was hanged in ’98.” The world is charged with electricity, and poetry is born out of the tension between sameness and difference, between that which lasts and that which changes.

Heaney’s renewed engagement with the energies of place in *Electric Light* is undoubtedly prompted by the changing political climate in the late 1990s. A consciousness of the ceasefire and its local consequences becomes apparent in the poem’s recollection of “Where the checkpoint used to be,” but this is a post-ceasefire poem in other ways as well. The stylistic corollary of the changed political order is a new willingness to entertain the ludic, self-reflexive, playfully riddling idiom that had previously appeared suspect. Heaney’s self-referencing now takes on a slippery, eel-like allusiveness. The closing lines both take us back to the earlier poetry and reassert a sense of changed priorities: “As once before / The slime and silver of the fattened eel” (2001: 3). The expected “sliver” is cleverly transformed into silver, and a subtle subliminal connection is established between electric light and electric eels. We are reminded both of the “prospecting” speaker amidst the elvers in the earlier “Toome,” but also of the phosphorescent eels near Toomebridge in Heaney’s early “Lough Neagh Sequence.” The light that came flooding in with the announcement of the ceasefire in August 1994 now seems to fill the poems with a new political promise and a new stylistic charge and energy.

Since 1994, Heaney’s poetry has taken on a more reflective, retrospective disposition; it has steadily, if cautiously, opened itself to the possibilities of reconciliation and peaceful settlement. Both before and after the ceasefire, Heaney has credited poetry with the responsibility of being a witness to its times, as well as an impulse for change. He has never abandoned the idea that

poetry might have “a desirable and demonstrable relation to the life of a nation,” even if his conception of poetry has broadened recently to admit more of “the ludic, the ironic, the parodic” than once seemed possible. It is still too early to tell how Heaney’s poetry might develop in the aftermath of new power-sharing initiatives at Stormont, but there is no doubt, as he himself has recognised, that things have “moved on.”

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