The Language of Dialogue: Thomas Merton’s Struggle With Peacemaking

I. Peace and the Feminine Principle

In 1965, the well-known monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote in a letter, “I think women are perhaps capable of salvaging something of humanity in our world today” (Letters IV, 165). That Summer, Merton was anxious for some women friends who were taking part in the Strike for Peace in Rome. He was hopeful about the role that he believed women were playing in the peace movement and he believed that these women in the action in Rome would have a positive impact on the Church’s “Scheme Thirteen” on peace. However, he sensed tensions that these women would have to overcome.

Merton was at this time fascinated with the idea of Hagia Sophia, or the feminine figure of wisdom in the writings of the Russian mystics. He was also growing in the recognition that what came by “sophia” would have to overcome obstacles. Perhaps chief among these was obscure language and abstraction.

This paper begins with this writer and peace activist’s reawakening interest in the feminine as a universal principle and asks if there is a unique voice in the feminine, perhaps a parallel to “l’écriture feminine” that emerges in speech and personal interconnection that may counter “male” abstraction and foster dialogue for peace. Specifically, I wish to consider how the feminine voice emerged for us in the 1960’s, at the time when Thomas Merton was returning to reflect upon this voice in the peace movement. In this paper, I wish to examine Merton as a prominent writer deeply committed to the peace movement, while struggling with it in his thought. Here the writings of Merton between 1965 and 1968 are used to draw attention to the American peace movement during the time of Vietnam. Specifically, I use Merton’s letters, journals and his essays on Albert Camus to encourage reflection on the presumably “male” language of abstract justice, law, and contract and the presumably “female” language of personal, familial, embodied experience that psychologist Carol Gilligan and ethicist Nel Noddings refer to in their work. Merton and Camus sought a concrete, existential correspondence between language and personhood that I believe may be suggestively placed alongside our inquiry into female concerns for peace, which perhaps speaks, to use Carol Gilligan’s words, “in a different voice.”
The “different voice” that Gilligan spoke of is one that is attentive to gestures of human sympathy, the tone and presence of human connection and compassionate action. However, it was clear to Thomas Merton that we also have need of words to communicate with each other. As Noam Chomsky has said, “When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man”(16). We might consider Michel Foucault’s sense of power discourse and ask who sets and defines the terms of jargon, such as ‘shock and awe,’ ‘body count,’ ‘collateral damage’, ‘friendly fire’, ‘securing’ a city, ‘predawn vertical insertion’ and other such terms. George Orwell called for less obfuscation and more precision in his well-known essay on the English language and he famously satirized the inversions of “double-speak” in his novel 1984. It is this concrete language that Merton and Camus call for as well in their writings.

What might women contribute to this discussion? Some psychologists have claimed that women’s speech is generally cooperative more than competitive, indirect, empathetic and relational rather than focused upon debate and fixing things as male language is said to be. Linguist Deborah Tannen claims that women are more highly attuned to metalanguage: that is, to context, tone, gesture, inflection, implication underneath statement. For Tannen, “Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication”(253).

Between 1965 and 1968, Thomas Merton appears to have had an inclination that the “different voice” of women was making a difference in the peace movement. As Carol Gilligan has suggested, women in small groups centered around an ethics of care may attend to peace and justice issues in ways that reflect personal, familial and concrete experience rather than the law and contract assessments of actions and effects she saw at work in many men’s discussions. . Gilligan, contesting Lawrence Kohlberg’s views, was arguing that female capacity for intimacy and connection is a valuable attribute. Both men and women think with a justice perspective, Gilligan claimed, but few men, in her view, speak from a “care” perspective. Merton, many years before Gilligan’s study, clearly saw this tendency of women to practice care and connection as useful in the dialogue of peacemaking. Nel Noddings, likewise, offers a similar reflection in Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.
Merton was moving toward an ethics of care, when was writing of Camus’ ethical perspective. He was at the same time deeply concerned about the war in Vietnam and the issue of violence and nonviolence. The ethics of care suggests that we are to assess situations from the perspective that we are concrete persons, in relation to each other. This “care” sets the context for dialogue and decision making. This care is a ground and Merton was seeking this ground ontologically, as well as through interpersonal letters and the circulation among acquaintances of mimeographed pages he had written on peace.

II. Merton and Camus: Opposing Abstraction

Merton’s study of Camus was concurrent with the stirrings within him about a relationship with a nurse he had met while in a hospital in Louisville for an operation. Of course, this was contrary to his monastic vows. However, his struggle with this clearly reawakened his interest in the feminine as a universal principle. Merton, at this time, turned to reflect upon Hagia Sofia, the feminine principle among the Russians of the Eastern Church. He also exchanged letters with female peace activists, including a visit by the folksinger Joan Baez.

Merton’s concern with the feminine appears to find a connection with his ongoing concern with abstraction as a cause of our world’s ills. The bombing of civilian populations, for instance, he believed, can only be carried out when people in those cities are no longer looked upon as people but are viewed in a detached manner as numbers or abstractions calculated into some strategic objective. Merton’s primary reference was the bombing of Hiroshima, upon which he reflected in “Original Child Bomb.” Merton thus opposed the debasement of language in social institutions and in the media. He believed that communal sensibilities are lost to the substitution of stereotypes for real responses which are personal and immediate.

Indeed, Merton wanted language to be personal and immediate. Against cliché triteness, he posited spontaneous utterance, the free flow of language. This frees the soul behind or beyond ego. This language - or poetry - seeks the depth. Merton said his writing was an act of meditating.

In a letter to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy on January 13, 1961, Thomas Merton spoke of a vision of peace that can only be achieved by people who “are able to unite in themselves and experience in their
own lives all that is best and most true in the various great spiritual traditions.” Merton believed that unity is discoverable in religious experience, that through a sharing of such experience, our religious traditions would be enriched and united in the pursuit of world peace. This begins in a communication which is communal and is communion. In a talk he gave in Calcutta, Merton said of this deep communication that “It is wordless, it is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we are to discover a new unity. We discover an older unity.” This is shared on a preverbal and a post-verbal level, Merton had earlier written in October 1968.

Zen focused Merton’s sense of Western abstractions and classifications altering being rather than attentively resting in being. Merton opposed abstraction and favored concreteness. To Paul Sih in 1962 Merton wrote: “There are times when one has to cut through all the knots, and the Zen view of things is a good, clean blade.” Merton’s interest in Zen reflects his concern with concrete language. As Merton himself noted in a May 1964 letter to William Johnston, Zen shares similarities with phenomenology and existentialism.

Existentialism is certainly where Merton was going in his final years, as he read with enthusiasm the works of Camus. Albert Camus' personal integrity appealed to Merton. Probably the French balance appealed to him also, and standing up for humanity in the face of all forces that would be crushing. The theme of authenticity echoes the most here. Romanticism of the Blakean kind also meets with existentialism: it would oppose "reason" or the positivistic way of looking at things. Existentialism of Marcel's sort is a personalism opposing the dehumanizing influences of rational abstraction.

It is the existential condition we see in the works of Camus that so deeply caught Thomas Merton’s imagination in his final years. In them, the tragic vision compels human beings to fight against their destiny. With Lear on the heath we ask, “is man no more than this?” Like Job in ashes, Ahab on the lonely deck, we are compelled not to sink into quietism; we are compelled to do something.

To write was Merton’s way of taking action, of pointing to a grace that defied the tragic. In his time, it was one way of facing the evil of bloodshed in the civil rights era and Vietnam. In ours, the tragic vision- Like the many ceremonies, masses, newscasts, this theater is ritual in response to a condition, an
answer in terms of gesture, a way of dealing creatively with pain and fear: a way to spiritualize it. This is what Merton was so often focused upon: contemplation in action. As Richard B. Sewall observes: “Whereas the philosophers and moralists would generalize on experience... and reduce experience to viable categories and prescriptions, the tragic artist explores each experience directly, de novo, for whatever it may reveal about man’s capacities and possibilities, He presses the boundary situation for its total yield” (7).

In his 1967 essay on William Faulkner, Merton addresses Faulkner in connection with Greek tragedy and sapiential thinking. He begins his essay with a reference to Camus, saying that “To Camus, Faulkner was one of the few modern writers who possessed “the keys of ancient tragedy” and who was able to discover in the back pages of the newspapers myths embodying the essential tragedy of our time” (LE, p.92).

Merton writes: “True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be “communion” beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a “preverbal” level but on a “postverbal” level.” Merton describes the preverbal as “the predisposition of mind and heart,” including a “freedom from automatisms and routines, and candid liberation from external social dictates, from conventions, limitations, and mechanisms which restrict understanding and inhibit the experience of the new, the unexpected.” The postverbal is described as a level “on which they both meet beyond their own words and their own understanding in the silence of an ultimate experience which might conceivably not have occurred if they had not met and spoken.” This I would call “communion” (315).

III. Merton’s Essays on Albert Camus

In 1957, the Nobel Prize committee cited Albert Camus for his contribution in bringing to light “with clear sighted earnestness [...] the problem of human conscience in our time.” In rebellion against the absurd in the human condition one is aware that it is possible to grasp values in and from life. “If we
believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 5).

Albert Camus practiced a tragic realism. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a rock rolls forever down a hill. In his novels emerges a similar stoic stance toward adversity: The stranger Merseult lives with no sense of purpose. A plague attacks the Algerian city of Oran. Jean Baptiste Clamence escapes to Amsterdam where he tells his story to strangers in a world that never seems to get any better. In Camus’ play, *State of Siege*, there comes the plague of totalitarianism. Camus’ works do not make for cheery reading. However, Merton pointed out the hope in Camus’ writing: “At the end of this tunnel of darkness […] there is inevitably a light which we already perceive and for which we only have to fight to ensure its coming” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 306). As James D. Wilkinson writes in comparing Camus world-view with Jean-Paul Sarte’s, “Yet Camus’ dissatisfaction with this purely negative view of man’s relations with his surroundings was evident as early as 1938, when he wrote in response to Nausea: “To declare the absurdity of life cannot be an end, but only a beginning.”” (Camus, “La Nausee de Jean-Paul Sartre” in *Essais*, p. 1419).

Merton sensed the tension between Camus’ committed stance of active resistance and the doctrines of pacifist non-violence. He read Camus’s comments in *Combat*, August 31, 1944: “If our voice can remain one of energy rather than hate, of proud objectivity rather than mediocrity, then… we will not have failed our trust.” Reflecting upon this matter of trust, Merton writes: “Pacifism and non-violence are fully and consciously involved in this question of language. Non-violence, as Gandhi conceived it, is in fact a kind of language. The real dynamics of non-violence can be considered as a purification of language, a restoration of true communication on a human level, when language has been emptied of meaning my misuse and corruption… Above all, nonviolence is meant to convey and defend truth which has been obscured and defiled by political double-talk” (Literary Essays, 27).

Merton assesses violence alongside Camus’ reflections:

“Man’s drive to destroy, to kill, or simply to dominate and oppress comes from the metaphysical void he experiences when he finds himself a stranger in his own universe.
He seeks to make that universe familiar to himself by using it for his own ends, but his own ends are capricious and ambivalent” (181).

“This is the source of Camusian anguish: Cartesian man, the detached subject, who is because he thinks […] having started out with the assumption that everything thinkable is comprehensible, suddenly finds out that everything thinkable is absurd […] From this illness, this absurdity, follow inexorable evils and injustices” (219).

“The peculiar intensity and honesty of Camus comes precisely from this tension in himself: his sense that he must give his life meaning by striving to make sense out of an absurd situation.” (220). It is the role of the rebel to engage in ‘revolt’ that “will replace empty forms with significant authentic acts” (Ibid).

His conclusion is that Albert Camus practices an existential witness which says “No” to the absurd” (221). In his Nobel Prize speech, Camus said that he sought “to fashion an art out of living in times of catastrophe, to be reborn by fighting openly against the death instinct at work in our society” (221). “Camus opposes to nihilism a certain “human measure” from the Greek tradition of moderation” (220).

The absurdity, as Merton sees it, is that the way “modern man is tempted consists in using all his resources of logic and science to demonstrate that his self-contradictions make perfect sense” (220). Merton sees Camus as “an ethical and political theorist.” This ethic begins in human values. Merton represents Camus as writing in a cycle of absurdity-revolt-nemesis-“a certain kind of love” (220-21). In Merton’s view, Camus “does not seek to prove that life has a meaning on the basis of philosophical evidence, but to make certain choices and decisions which, because they are in accord with the hidden value of life, bring that value out into full view” (223). Camus seeks to make clear. He has “an intuitive preference for lucidity as a fundamental human value” (224).

Merton describes Camus as “perhaps one of the most serious and articulate ethical thinkers of the twentieth-century.” He asserts that Camus was one who “spoke as the moral conscience of an embattled generation” (252). For Merton, Camus confronted nihilism and sought “the recovery of a basic and primordial humanism” (252).

Camus espouses classical order, the ancient Greek notion of moderation and balance. To fall out of balance is to be pursued by nemesis. In Merton’s view, Camus speaks “against the revolution in all its
The Rebel refuses alienation and affirms possibility, even in the face of adversity that appears to shut off possibilities. As Merton puts it, he will not be “resigned to letting his life be destroyed or mutilated in the name of something else, whether it be business, or politics, or money, or revolution” (239).

“But while we admit that his conclusions are somewhat different from those of an ideally Christian nonviolence, they are at the same time a more strict and rigorous rejection of force than we find in the traditional Christian “just war” theory.” In practice we can say that Camus, while admitting that violence may be necessary, speaks and writes as a pacifist not only in the face of global war but also in the face of world revolution. He contends that the power struggle of our time… is essentially nihilistic” (241).

In 1946, Camus writes, “There is only one problem today, which is that of murder. All our disputes are in vain. One thing alone matters: peace” (242, Merton cites Camus, *Essais*, p. 1669).

In reading Camus, the challenge of peace has become clearer for Merton. To uphold human dignity and freedom one faces the absurd. If one does not, observes Merton, “we surrender to unreason and unfreedom in the name of abstractions which ignore our human nature and inexorably lead to our own destruction” (242). Camus’ answer to this is ‘revolt,’ which is never conformity to an ideology. The Rebel faces the absurdity as a position of autonomy, commitment, and refusal. As Merton puts it, “The rebel is then not simply the disgruntled individual” (242).

An “authenticity of human solidarity and compassion” is what “balances and nullifies the absurd,” says Merton. This type of revolt faces “limitation, uncertainty, vulnerability” (243). It needs clarity, “lucidity.” Camus writes, “What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it.
And if we choose to serve that community we choose to serve the dialogue carried to the absurd against any policy of falsehood or of silence” (Camus *Notebooks*, 126).

Merton “reconstructs” what he believes is a central idea in Camus’ notebooks: “[W]hen men speak out, they define for one another the absurd. When they find themselves in the presence of the absurd and recognize the need to revolt against it, in affirmation of life against death, they undertake a struggle against absurdity, in solidarity with one another.” One does not resign or agree. Recognizing the absurd “is a clearing of the ground” for human solidarity (244-45).

“Revolt is the negation of this idolized abstraction” writes Merton, interpreting Camus. “Revolt is the refusal to agree with an absurd self-destroying social system. Revolt affirms the life which that system negates and destroys in the name of abstraction” (246).

Camus writes, “Mankind’s dialogue has just come to an end. And naturally a man with whom one cannot reason is a man to be feared” (cited in Merton, 246). Responding to a Marxist critic in 1948, Camus said, “I have never argued for non-violence […] I believe that violence is inevitable, and the years of the [Nazi] occupation have convinced me of it… I only say that we must refuse all legitimation of violence” (*Reponse a’ E. d’Astir*, p. 355; cited by Merton, 247).

Merton cautions each individual against “a sense of subjective righteousness which may blind him to the fact that he is still deeply involved in collective guilt and violence” (249). Merton, a monk vowed to ‘silence’ and obedience, questions why Camus identifies nonviolence with silence and submission. He believes that “authentic resistance is active and should be highly articulate, since as it is understood in the Gandhian sense, it demands much more lucidity and courage than the use of force does.” (249).

The tension with Gandhian principles and Camus’ position soon arises. Merton notes that Camus believes that the rebel may be compelled by duty to take up arms to “limit violence.” Indeed, this is a “just war” idea we can trace back to St. Augustine. Merton asks, “but what war-making institution does not in practice claim to be limiting violence and fighting for peace?”(Ibid)
Merton recognizes that Camus “was not a man of precise and doctrinaire solutions.” Neither is he. He says of Camus, “He did not want to dictate absolute formulas in the realm of political and historical action” (250). Camus “left the way open for the use of force, in a situation where there might be no other way of liberating oneself from intolerable oppression” (220). For Merton, Camus sought to establish “the moral climate of insight, loyalty, and courage” (250). This would be “faithful to human limits and the human measure” (251). It would involve “the resolute refusal to accept any system which rests directly and essentially on the justification of killing, especially mass killing, whether by war or by more subtle forms of destructive domination” (251).

For Camus, there is “a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions” (p.438, *Neither Victims or Executioners*). Camus is engaged in a “prophetic argument” like John Milton, Merton suggests. This is one with reference to Greek tragedy and its concepts of hubris and nemesis. For Camus, it is necessary to place no ideologies above humanity.

“The absurd of Camus is not the metaphysical absurd and neant of Sartre and his revolt is not the Sartrean nausea,” writes Merton. “The absurd of Camus is the gap between the actual shape of life and intelligent truth. Absurdity is compounded by the ambiguous and false explanations, interpretations, conventions, justifications, legalizations, evasions, which infect our struggling civilization with “the plague” and which often bring us most dangerously close to perfect nihilism when they offer a security based on a seeming rational use of absolute power” (268).

Our option, for both Camus and Merton is solidarity “in the service of life and humanity” (270). Merton echoes his own stance when he writes that “Camus was never and out-and-out pacifist. He always admitted the possibility of a strictly limited use of force” (Ibid).

Considering the work of Albert Camus James Wilkinson writes of the German situation in the 1930’s: “Language was thus subordinated to the party’s needs and became an instrument of control, devoid of formal integrity. Wehrmacht, for example, suggested a simple defensive force, whereas its mission had been to subjugate a continent.” He cited a comment by Moltke in 1941: “Words have lost their unequivocal meaning, symbols no longer evoke a uniform concept, works of art have been robbed
of their true significance and-like all cultural values-become functional. They serve the state… and have become relativized.” (Wilkinson 127). Camus equated linguistic clarity with ethical integrity. He saw that language needed to be stripped of its rhetoric and made more concrete. It was much as Hemingway had written earlier in *A Farewell to Arms* of a desire to avoid abstract words and to name concrete things, to pin the world down in particulars.

As Wilkinson reminds us: “The problem of language became a central issue for those young intellectuals who felt alienated from traditional German culture […] The renewal of language symbolized hopes for a more basic renewal of the nation’s intellectual and ethical foundations” (128). Meanwhile, for Italian writers, “The Italian concern for language, stimulated by contact with American literature, occupies a place within the broader scheme of moral and ontological questions raised by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Eich and Boll. But whereas the French intellectuals approached language as a problem of communication between conflicting freedoms and the Germans saw in it a key to the perception of reality, Italians… saw it as the symbol of the gap between an aristocratic and a popular culture…. [T]hey aspired to create a literature that would speak to the masses and to the intellectuals alike” (206). Today might there be a criticism which is also able to operate in this way?

**IV. 1960’s: Vietnam, Peace Movements, Merton’s Struggle with Peacemaking**

Between 1965-68, in Vietnam, America relied upon a strategy of attrition. Some argued that war was being waged by indiscriminate and disproportionate means. The antiwar left were not the only ones who questioned this. The United States airforce flew some 300 daily sorties across targets in South Vietnam, with pilots bombing from 3,500 feet. The U.S. dropped 13 million tons of bombs in South Vietnam, the land that the United States was attempting to defend. There were 400,000 tons of napalm and 11.2 million gallons of Agent Orange. This destroyed some 25 million acres of farmland and 12 million acres of forest. More than 50,000 Vietnamese dies in this bombing. The carcinogenic herbicide Agent Orange prompted illnesses in American servicemen and Vietnamese, as well as birth defects for the next generation.
On November 11, 1965 Thomas Merton expressed his concern about the anti-Vietnam peace movement in his journal. A Catholic Worker member had immolated himself in front of the United Nations and Merton was deeply upset by this.

“A sad day,” he called it. “This is fantastic and horrible […]” he wrote of the incident. “I cannot understand the shape of things in the Peace Movement or the shape of things at all in this country. What is happening? Is everybody nuts?”

This reflection comes from someone who was deeply committed to the work through his writing. However, he wrote, “I am so disturbed by the events, and especially the suicide at the U.N. that I sent a telegram to Dorothy Day and this telegram to Jim Forest of the Catholic Peace Fellowship:

While I do not hold Catholic Peace Fellowship responsible for the tragedy, current developments in Peace Movement make it impossible for me to continue to as sponsor for Fellowship. Please remove my name from list of sponsors, letter follows.

“I wondered if I had been too hard on Jim and the Catholic Peace Fellowship,” Merton added in his journal. “But with things as crazy as they are, I cannot let my name be used by an outfit as unpredictable as that is, with kids likely to do anything at any moment.”

His friends Dan Berrigan, Jim Forrest and Dorothy Day responded with letters. So did Tom Cornell with a letter on draft card burning that Merton called “lucid.”

On November 20, 1965, Merton wrote in his journal, ”While I respect their conscience, I don’t think this is the most valid or helpful kind of statement at the moment, and I will have to get some idea of where I stand. This in turn shows that there is some incompatibility between my solitary life and active involvement in a movement.”

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Merton, in the midst of his meditations on the Catholic peace movement, turned to Camus for insight into resistance and opposition. Camus appeared to embody French classical literature’s sense of balance. Camus’ call for moderation, appealed to Merton also. In Camus, he read of standing up for humanity in the face of all forces that would be crushing. The theme of authenticity echoes the most here. Romanticism of the Blakean kind also meets with existentialism: it would oppose "reason" or the
positivistic way of looking at things. Existentialism of Marcel's sort is a personalism opposing the
dehumanizing influences of rational abstraction. (Merton referred to this as “the birds of appetite.”)

V. Language, Meaning, and Dialogue for Peace

Thomas Merton, as a poet, sought carefully through language for clear ways of articulating the
need for a dialogue for the sake of peace. Breaking through abstract language was central to this work.
Merton wrote: “In an age of highly academic linguistic analysis, Camus appreciated the courage of
(Brice) Parain, who sees the problem of language as ultimately a metaphysical problem. The questioning
of meaning raises the whole question of reality itself…” Are we making “a series of more or less
arbitrary noises in the solitude of a mute world”? (LE, 271)

The care and concern of Merton’s personalism is allied with his focus on how we use words to
express meaning. He wrote, “We are thus called to take care of our language, and use it clearly” (LE,
272). Our task is “to reshape an accurate and honest language that will permit communication… instead
of multiplying a Babel of esoteric and technical tongues which isolate men in their specialties” (Ibid).
Such language will help us to rethink our world. Concrete language will connect us in dialogue, whereas
“all kinds of technical and specialized thinking tend to remove us from the world in which others, and we
ourselves, are plunged in the dangers and the sufferings of an increasingly absurd and unmanageable
social situation.” Merton adds that “we need to rethink that whole situation, and we no longer possess the
language with which to do it” (Ibid).

Merton has not given up on the power of language, however. He holds out the possibility of a
renewal of language that carries the sort of integrity and directness he finds present in Camus. This
supports the view that in order to “rethink,” we need to reformulate a language that is accessible to all
people (Ibid). This will consist in “returning to the words of everybody, but bringing to them the
humanity that is required for them to be purified of lies and hatred” (LE, 273). We can make this
language “unambiguous and fully accessible,” by focusing on what the word peace means, so that it is not
converted into its opposite. Merton writes, “We need to rebuild a world of peace. We cannot do this until
we can recover the language and think of peace” (LE, 274). In this we will recover the voice and the
terms that will help us to move forward in a common effort toward dialogue.

**Works Cited**


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