

EROS AND ECSTASY: ON THE ENACTMENT OF SACRIFICE IN VLADIMIR BARTOL'S NOVEL *ALAMUT*

Roman prepleta zgodbo (pripoved o nastanku šiitske islamske ločine izmailcev – asasinov) z ubesediljeno predstavo (opis pripovednega prizorišča/scene), in sicer z namenom predstavitve naukov, običajev in okultnih veščin sekte. V mejah gorske trdnjave Alamut duhovni vodja in gospodar Hasan Ibn Saba, ki je kot bog, oblikuje državo v državi po svojem velikem načrtu, ki vključuje tudi raj, kot je naslikan v Koranu, ta pa je prizorišče poskusov na človeški psihi. Po ponovni pridobitvi navidezne moči z (ritualno) drogo se to gledališče spremeni v obred za fedaije (tiste, ki se žrtvujejo). S strategijo preobleke in pretvarjanja, ki je simulacija in de-simulacija, gledališčni postopek zastavlja pomisleke o razmerju med močjo in moralo, pa tudi o upravičevanju totalnosti in absolutnega.

zgodovinski roman, asasini, »gledališče droge«, erotika, žrtvovanje, umetni raj, psihološki eksperiment, manipulacija, V. Bartol, *Alamut*

The novel fuses *histoire* (the narration of the emergence of the Shi'ite-Islamic faction of the Nezâris, the 'Assassins') and textualized performance (the description of various aspects of the narrative's *mise-en-scène*) in an attempt to re-present the order's teachings, practice and occult knowledge. In the enclosed area of the mountain fortress Alamut, the intellectual head and master, Hasan-i Sabbah, is God-like, modeling a state within the state according to his grand plan that also includes a paradise as pictured by the Koran – the latter being a stage for experiments on the human psyche. Regaining illusionary power by means of a (ritual) drug, this theater turns into a rite of passage for the Fedayin ('self-sacrificing ones'). Based on strategies of disguise, that is *simulation* and *dissimulation*, the theater's *procédé* questions the relation between power and ethics as well as the legitimization of totality and the absolute.

historical novel, Assassins, "theater of drug," eroticism, sacrifice, artificial paradise, psychological experiment, manipulation, V. Bartol, *Alamut*

For orientalists and oriental scholars alike, many questions concerning the so-called 'Assassins' – an order derived from the Shi'ite-Islamic faction of the Nezâris,¹ dating from the 11th to the 13th century – remain unsolved till the present day. The public history of the Assassins began in 1090 when their grand master,

¹ The Nezâris/Assassins are an outcome of dynastic strife among the Ismaili who established the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt. See HODGSON 1955, GELPKE 1966, LEWIS 1968.

Sayyidna Hasan-i Sabbah, and his allies captured the hill fortress of Alamut in northern Iran, until then deemed invincible. In its early years, they were known for murdering their enemies as a matter of religious duty. The radical means of achieving their ends like self-sacrifice and blind obedience remain a mystery until today. Thus the Assassins have been a potent source of myths and legends; especially through their connection with ‘Alamūt’ (meaning ‘eagle’s nest’), in Arabic is spelled without short vowels, but identical with ‘al-mawt’ (meaning ‘death’). This homology always had the potential to fuel a terrifying symbolism that would have a deep impact on all outsiders (see Hodgson 1955: 138, note 48; Gelpke 1966: 293).

Representations of the Assassins both in literature and in the realm of science are numerous, contradictory and in part fantastically garnished. The Slovenian Modernist writer, Vladimir Bartol, is one of those who entered the space of the imaginary with a novel entitled *Alamut* (Bartol [1938] 1988).² In the fictional space of his novel, Bartol revises the traditions of the *histoire* which themselves are based on legends³ that are anchored in the occidental *imaginaire collective* representing the repository of ‘historical truth’. One such ‘traditional’ source is that of Marco Polo, whose account is made up of the stories he gathered from hearsay in Persia only a few decades after the Mongols had annihilated the fortress of Alamut and the order. One of the legend formed by those stories communicates how the future assassins were supposedly prepared for their missions by being drugged with hashish and brought into a secret garden, where houris served them and where they were told they had visited Paradise to which they would return if they were killed in action (see Gelpke 1966: 271–272). Polo’s story acquired all the more credibility when the French scholar and orientalist, Silvestre de Sacy, apparently confirmed it in 1809.⁴ De Sacy made his point by emphasizing that both the French and English word ‘assassin’ derives from Arabic *hashāshīhī*, its plural being *hashīshiyīn*, meaning ‘hashish-eater’. Accordingly, he interpreted Marco Polo’s account as follows: The Assassins were small in number, therefore, they developed sophisticated strategies for political assassination. The pleasures from the consumption of the drug bestowed fear and terror, so unanimously attested to, inciting recklessness on the dispatched assassins.⁵

1 Textual performance

Bartol’s novel blends the narration of the emergence of the Assassins with the description of various aspects of the narrative’s *mise-en-scène*. The intellectual head

² Due to lack of space, passages from *Alamut* (hereafter referred to as ‘A’ plus page numbers) are given in English only (my translation), their loci in the original are presented though as well.

³ The very last sentence of the novel – »The fairy tale took him under its wing.« (A 547) – is proof of Bartol’s awareness that his fiction is nurtured by the image of the assassins rooted in folk tales.

⁴ »Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins ...«, *Mémoire de l’institut Royal* 4 (1818), 1–85.

⁵ Quite early, Hodgson doubted the possibility of carrying out precise assassinations when under the influence of drugs (see HODGSON 1955: 135–137).

and master, Hasan-i Sabbah,⁶ enters the world stage as an ingenious and ambitious architect, playwright and director. In the enclosed area of the mountain fortress Alamut, he is God-like and models a “state within the state” (see Gelpke 1966: 284) according to his grand plan that also includes a paradise as pictured in the Koran. His intention is to bring up disciples who will be once again inspired by the belief in Mohammed, in paradise as described in the Koran, and in the spiritual leader who holds the keys to paradise which he can open up for anyone depending solely on his will. In order to pass on his legacy to the two Deys, Abu Ali and Buzruk Umid, Sabbah reveals his conviction and puts into action his scenario: The three men, disguised in magnificent costumes, enter paradise, i. e. the stage and core of the legends that Bartol derives from the existing tradition on the Assassins. The speech addressed by Sabbah to the garden’s inhabitants functions as a prologue to the drama, introducing the spectator to the following proceedings and casts the spell of God over the scene:

“Sabbah, our Prophet and our spokesman,” the Lord said. “Behold these gardens. And afterward, return home to earth and create a very precise imitation behind your fortress. There, gather beautiful maidens and command them in my name to behave like houris. To these gardens you will send those heroes who have fought most bravely for the good course. As a reward, they shall believe that we have welcomed them in our house. Because no one except the prophet and you are allowed to cross the border into our kingdom during lifetime. Since your gardens will be the exact copy of our own, their visitors will not feel hurt as long as their belief stands firm. Later, after their death, the continuation of that happiness will be awaiting them under our authority unto eternity.” (A 270.)

Five acts follow this prologue, whose individual end Sabbah monotonously voices:⁷

Act I. Hasan announces his decision to open up the gates to the Fedayin. He provides their journey to paradise with food and drink, with hashish and wine (see A 286). And, he compares the running performance with Greek tragedy: “Everything here is like in a Greek tragedy. Thanks to Allah, the first act is over now” (A 287).

Act II. The Fedayin become actors on a stage of which they cannot tell whether it belongs to a dream or a (manipulated) reality. The act comprises the stay in the artificial paradise, the pleasures of carnal play with the houris and the consumption of wine, until a second drug induces sleep and brings them back to their master.

Act III. This act is entitled by the master “‘The awakening’ or ‘The return from Paradise’” (A 370). Throughout this act, the Fedayin attest their belief in the real existence of paradise and their blind obedience to the master. By doing so, they give apparent verbal evidence of a change taking place inside them, affecting their souls.

⁶My spelling follows the consulted secondary literature.

⁷Sabbah’s announcements can be found in A 287, 365, 370, 457, 545. M. Košuta plots the dramatic setting of the novel and its reference to the Greek tradition (KOŠUTA 1988: 589–592), thereby playfully utilizing Bartol’s structure for his afterword.

Act IV. The fourth act becomes a public spectacle of “an experiment in the transformation of human nature” (A 265) in the fortress. Two fedayin commit suicide: one stabs himself, the other jumps to his death, by command of the master, confirming their loyalty, absolute obedience, and a conviction that is blind to any reasonable argument. In short, they are proof of a transformation of the human soul. This outcome is commented by the Greek al-Hakim:

For what we have seen in the fortress this morning with our own eyes, surpasses the imagination of even the most inventive Greek playwright. The spectacle which our highest leader had presumed to present to us this morning has been staged with such sophisticated terror that the king of hell could easily have envied him for it (A 458).

V. Act. The last act of the tragedy stages both the appearance of Hasan-i Sabbah in front of his followers and his declaration that waiting for the Al-Madhi be brought to an end.⁸

After the fifth act, functioning more or less as epilogue to the tragedy, Sabbah disappears from the world stage in order to devote himself to writing down his doctrine,⁹ to writing down his ‘play text’ to the dramatic performances that represent his enacted testament. The scenario of the Prospero-figure holding all strings of the plot in his hands follows the quinary division that already Seneca chose as a fixed structure for his revenge drama. When Shakespeare adopted the same structure for his historical plays, it became part of the canon of the European dramatic form. In Bartol’s novel, the radical absoluteness of the revenge, the assassination of the grand vizier of the Saljuq Sultans, Nizam al-Mulk, results not only from the constellation of the legend which linked Nizam with Hasan-i Sabbah and Omar Khayyam, one of Persia’s greatest astronomers and mathematicians, as fellow-students who had made a pact about their respective careers (see Hodgson 1955: 137–138).¹⁰ It is also based on the ‘theater of drugs’,¹¹ performed during the first three acts. The presentation in Bartol’s novel seems to draw heavily on experiences with drug-experiments in Europe in the 19th and early 20th century,¹² to

⁸ The 12th Imam, born in direct descent to the prophet’s son-in-law, ‘Ali, disappeared mysteriously in 868 and was expected back. Although Sabbah had not pronounced himself Imam – as the fourth leader of the Assassins, Hasan II., did in 1164 –, he conferred the Imam’s authority on someone else on earth, who would carry out the divine mission that is not to be questioned by his believers. Through the Imam, the divine truth becomes visible and is turned into the living evidence of God on earth.

⁹ All original writings by the Nezâris were burnt with the fall of the fortress of Alamut in 1256, during the conquest by the Mongols. Sabbah’s autobiography known as *Sarguzasht-i Sayyidnâ* (*The adventures of our Lord*) became one source for *The history of the world-conqueror* written by the Persian historian of the Mongol period ‘Atâ Malik Juvayni’s (1226–1283) which is known as one of the most objective treatises on the Nezâris.

¹⁰ This legend entered the Western imagination through E. Fitzgerald’s preface to his translation of some rubâiyât by Omar Khayyam (see KHAYYAM 1953: 51–54). Another fictionalised version of the relationship between these three men is offered in A. Maalouf’s novel *Samarcande* (1988).

¹¹ MARSCHALL 2000 coins this expression and refers it to the theatricality of the states of consciousness by drugs.

¹² Monographs on the cultural phenomenon of drug and its influence on literature are MICKEL 1969, KUPFER 1996, MARSCHALL 2000.

wit Thomas de Quincey's 'Opium-eater' whom the drug leads into imaginary worlds of perception, or the Parisian *Club des Hachichins*¹³ that posits the juxtaposition of literary production and drug consumption as its aesthetic program, or Charles Baudelaire's *Paradis artificiels* (1860).¹⁴ As for the latter, Baudelaire describes the three phases of drug ecstasy, culminating in the *jouissance* of the *kief* as "Théâtre de Séraphin" (Baudelaire 1994: 23–55). Those who have not been initiated into the drug experience imagine intoxication by means of hashish as a dream world, as an immeasurable theater performed by tricksters and conjurers (ibid.: 23). Moreover, the similarities between the stages passed through during drug ecstasy and a theater performance, when perceived under the influence of drugs, makes it possible to order the different perceptions. Therefore, the stages during drug use are structured as a 'staged play' (see also Marschall 2000: 1–9), just as in Bartol's novel, through which the order's teachings, practice and occult knowledge come to be represented as a "textual performance" (Lee 1990: 80).¹⁵

2 Artificial paradises

Although the use of drugs by the Nezâris is neither attested to by Ismaili nor by serious Sunni sources (see Lewis 1968: 11–12, 112), let us nevertheless assume that taking hashish to induce ecstatic visions of paradise before setting out to face martyrdom was practiced. The narcotic effects of hashish were no secret at that time and could have served as an explanation for the mystery of the Nezâris. Baudelaire, condemning hashish on moral terms since it weakens the will, explains – referring to the Assassins – the impropriety of hashish by pointing out the Assassins' cult of Eros as exemplified by their adoration of the houris (see Baudelaire 1994: 68). For Baudelaire, the Assassin sells his soul in order to pay off the most exciting love services and the friendship of the maidens in Mohammed's paradise. He buys the paradise for eternal bliss (ibid.: 82).

One could reproach Baudelaire that his argumentation follows the sources which he refers to, especially Marco Polo and de Sacy, too closely and that he makes no attempt to approach Islamic mysticism. However, Baudelaire ascertains something very important: The brain and organism on which hashish has an effect, induce only ordinary individual phantoms, even if increased in number and energy, that nonetheless always correspond to their source. The state of ecstasy, into which they are put, causes nothing extraordinary, for the imaginative power already always anticipates the ideal of ecstasy. In other words, the drugs evoke Baudelaire's "artificial ideal" (ibid.: 15). The human being cannot escape the fate of his/her

¹³ Théophile Gautier gave this name to the circle which included Balzac, Flaubert, Nerval and Moreau de Tours in his narrative of the same title published in 1846. He himself had stimulated the circle's interest in hashish intoxication.

¹⁴ The central idea of which would comprise art, the artificial, the longing for an ideal world, the quest for alternative realities, while the experience of intoxication is regarded to be the key to revelation.

¹⁵ With this narrative technique Bartol is preempting 'postmodern performance', thereby simultaneously disclosing, concealing and manipulating the borders between reality and fiction.

physical and moral disposition. In Bartol's work, this fact is illustrated through the different reactions of the Fedayin: All of them had been submitted to a rigid training in ascetic life and the teachings of the Koran. Their belief should already have been firm enough while the drug-induced paradise experience should only enhance it. On his way to paradise, Suleiman is trying to fight off the hallucinatory phantoms which are falsifying reality around him, while Tahir who is within the artificial paradise is considering two possibilities of his state: Either the paradise is the effect of the pill or the Ismailian doctrine and Sabbah's claim to hold the keys to paradise must be true. After their return, both are convinced of the existence of paradise. The feda'is Obeida however, being already suspicious of the reports from paradise, refuses to accept the illusion. Narratively enacted as the refusal to take the drug, this act symbolizes his unbelieving and immaturity in terms of the Ismailitic doctrine, thus making his death imminent.

Bartol constructs Sabbah as a madman who wants to enter Allah's sphere of creation, to knead and form the clay anew in order to contrive the truly new human (see A 256). He is a madman with the ambition of a master-builder, who restores the Kings of Daylam's gardens for his experiment with the human psyche. By using drugs, he hopes to produce disciples who would be induced to love death and follow their leader in total obedience. However, it is the hashish-eater himself who transforms his environment into an aesthetical-theatrical space and shifts his perception of reality in favour of the notion of possibility. Sabbah, too, interprets the artificial paradise as the hallucination of a certain wish.¹⁶

The 'theater of drugs' of the first three acts does not address itself to a public of spectators, but aims at an augmentation of consciousness, a mirroring of the unconscious, of the human psyche. In Bartol's novel, wine and hashish transport the Feyadin into paradise. The ceremony at which the master serves them food and drink, hashish and wine is compared with Greek tragedy, in which the cult of Dionysos is reflected. In the fourth and fifth act, the stage is transposed into the exterior. The theater performance turns into a participatory rite that will arouse and overwhelm the audience through a state of intense perception. Sabbah's theater therefore resembles Nietzsche's vision of ecstatic and ritual theater based on myths, developed in his *Birth of Tragedy*. Sabbah's theatre also alludes to Antonin Artaud's 'theater of cruelty', which releases that magic freedom of dreams that is suffused with horror and cruelty, in which the individual's inclination to crime, erotic obsessions and many other pathological states are set free (see Artaud 1997: 91–97). It is a theater about the theater of life, a 'metatheatre' (Abel 1963) which – in contrast to tragedy – adheres to two guiding principles going back to Shakespeare and Calderón: "life *must* be a dream and the *world* must be a stage" (ibid.: 79). This metatheater thus formulates the question of the fictionality of life or the reality of fiction respectively. Human beings are actors, their actions and emotions are

¹⁶ This approach to the human psyche draws back on psychoanalysis, esp. Sigmund Freud's *Traumdeutung* (1900).

theatrical and their lives seem to be like a dream since the world is only a construct of human consciousness. Since there is no other world than the one which we create by means of our imagination, this metatheater is as true as our dreams, for theater doubles life, and life doubles true theater.

3 Eros and Ecstasy

The ecstatic obsession with which the Nezâric elite, the Fedayin, the ‘self sacrificing ones’, the ‘Opfergänger’ (Gelpke 1966: 275), have pursued the annihilation of their enemy, sacrificing their own lives, must appear to the outsider as an unbelievable trick. However, this obsession can probably be explained by the Ismailian esoteric philosophy and occult practices of the order. The readiness for sacrifice of the Fedayin could possibly be grounded in the idea that physical death can purge so that they can enter a higher spiritual level.¹⁷ The alternative sacrifice which Hasan-i Sabbah enacts with his ‘theater of cruelty’ would then be a self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community and the right belief.

The Imam of the Shi’ites embodies a sort of perfect master whose spiritual authority is unanimously acknowledged. Thus, Bartol’s Sabbah as spiritual leader of the Assassins claims for himself to hold the keys to paradise. From their master, the Fedayin get access to secret knowledge. They receive the key to decipher the mysteries and enigmas of the Koran, which is intellectual knowledge but also existential esoteric knowledge, reserved only for those in the know. The only chance to pass on the latter is the rite of passage, an archetypal concept of death and rebirth, from one stage of being to another. The initiation rite serves as the human being’s preparation for ecstasy as a means of transcending human limitations and achieving mystical union with the divine. The highest goal of being is to free the self from physical dependence and to attain to the ecstatic union with the ONE, that is God, who is beyond the rational and constitutes the source of the entire universe.

Poets and mystics have claimed Eros and Ecstasy as the keys to the ‘secret’, because one has to overcome the prison of the ‘ego’, consisting of time and space, before one can get a glance at paradise (see Gelpke 1966: 277). This paradise is not only the quintessence of perfection and vision of eternal harmony, illustrated in the Koran by words whose music exerts a never-heard, untranslatable spell. According to the Swiss orientalist Rudolf Gelpke, it is quite possible that ‘paradise’ is to be understood as a certain degree of spiritual illumination that can be gained by certain people already in their lifetimes and which after their physical deaths will just enter the state of definite and absolute realization (ibid.: 291–292). Wine as beverage for the chosen ones in paradise means a symbol of revelation and truth. The images of worldly love and alcoholic consumption, traditionally forbidden by Islam, which

¹⁷ The zeal for martyrdom is probably grounded in a major event at the origin of Shi’ism, the slaughter of the Prophet’s grandson, Husayn, in 680.

are referred to also by mystics, stand for Eros and drunkenness, divine Love and ecstasy.

In his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in the third essay entitled “What is the meaning of ascetic ideals”, Nietzsche defines the assassins as an “order of free spirits *par excellence*” (Nietzsche 1919: 163). However, according to Nietzsche, nothing was really more alien to those so-called ‘free spirits’ than freedom, and their absolute belief in truth was unparalleled. The unconditional will to truth is to Nietzsche the belief in the ascetic Ideal itself, even if only subconsciously. It is the belief in a metaphysical value which presents the value of truth as it is inscribed in that Ideal. The ascetic Ideal stands above any philosophy, for truth equals being, the divine, God. As the expression of a certain form of will, the ascetic state is the will to nothing. While the lowest grade of the assassins lived in a state of discipline such as no order has ever attained, the highest carried a weight that resulted from their symbol and axiom “Nothing is true, everything is allowed” –

that was freedom of thought, thereby was taking leave of the very belief in truth, Has indeed any European, any Christian freethinker, ever yet wandered into this proposition and its labyrinthine consequences? Does he know from experience the Minotauros of this den? (Ibid.: 163–164.)

In an attempt of “seeing from a perspective” (ibid.: 124), Bartol’s novel fuses perceptions of those who know and are experienced and those others who are outside, of followers and enemies, observers with spatial and temporal distances, views from inside and outside. The figure of Hasan-i Sabbah, the master of the Nezâris, the ‘Old Man of the Mountain’,¹⁸ the one who is in the know of this den, has archetypal features. To the outsider and the unknowing one, he will be an embodiment of Satan masquerading as God, who conjures his ‘worldly’ paradise to be the ‘heavenly’ one. From an occidental perspective, he would be a political ideologist who is utilizing paradise as a means to his ends, a seducer abusing the eternal longing of the human being for paradise, transforming the Fedayin into will-less instruments of his daemonic will to power.¹⁹ The Nezâris have deduced and defined anew the rules for conduct on behalf of a higher truth in politics, power, and morals. What is truly daemonic is the fact that mystics utilize assassination as a political tool in their attempt to combine esoteric spirituality with military methods (see Gelpke 1966: 292–293).

¹⁸The title *Old Man of the Mountain* was used only in Syria and among the Crusaders. ‘Old Man’ is a literal translation of the Persian word *pîr* or the Arabic *shaykh*, ‘master’, a common term of respect among Muslims.

¹⁹In order to understand Bartol’s concept of the daemonic, refer to Bartol’s study on Goethe (BARTOL 1932). There he chooses as motto Plato’s *Symposium* where Diotima and Socrates discuss ‘Eros’ as a ‘Daemon’, a spirit-like man who fills in the space between God and man so that the whole is bound close together (see PLATO 1998: 80).

Sabbah's theater in Bartol's novel questions the 'theater of drugs' as a means to illusion, based on strategies of disguise, simulation and dissimulation. What is more, the theater's *procédé* imposes the question of the relationship between power and ethics as well as the legitimization of totality and the absolute. For Tahir, in Bartol's novel the feda'is who murders the grand vizier and – in contrast to history – does not die, the artificial paradise is suggested as a simulation of the dying Vizier. Tahir's reaction, who – because of his (mis)understanding due to his immaturity – is trying at first to murder his master, is only the consistent enactment of Sabbah's own thoughts:

If they [the Fedayin] suspected, that they were only a toy, a will-less pawn in my hands. Nothing but a means and tools, that are utilized by a higher power, a greater spirit, that is pursuing some mysterious plan (A 317).

Life is a hall of mirrors full of illusions, and the 'theater of drugs' is a dreamt world, a stage without borders between fiction and reality. To his question at what point in life illusion starts, at what point truth ends, Sabbah answers:

Our consciousness alone can tell reality from dream. If our Fedayin while waking up are convinced of the fact, that they have been to paradise, then they have really been there! For there is no difference between a true and a false paradise. There, where we are convinced to have been, there, we have been in truth (A 303).

The Assassins, who in Bartol's novel see themselves as the sons of Zarathustra (see A 488), could be compared with the Shadow which follows Nietzsche's Zarathustra and proclaims the axiom "Nothing is true, everything is allowed" (Nietzsche 1999: 340). However, the Shadow does not please the prophet who tries to run away. The Assassins seem to have terminated the escape from that dreadful labyrinth of our world whose main driving forces are error and illusion (see A 362). According to Bartol's Sabbah, illusion should no longer be regarded as an evil for mankind but a necessity for living, to which one has to adapt sooner or later; to his mind illusion is "the only possible standpoint for those who have reached a higher level of knowledge" (A 302). This standpoint leads up to the Assassins' supreme principle that is said to be deriving from the Kalif al-Hakim. This *secretum* namely, "nothing is true, everything is allowed", would according to Nietzsche lead to the renunciation of affirmation as well as negation. For Bartol, it is the decision to ascend the Al Araf that symbolizes the standpoint of all those whose eyes had been opened like those of the feda'is Tahir; and all those who have the courage to act in accordance with their knowledge: "Al-Araf is the balance between good and bad" (A 491).

*Would you that spangle of Existence spend
About the secret – quick about it, Friend!
A Hair perhaps divides the False and True –
And upon what, prithee, may life depend?*²⁰

²⁰ KHAYYĀM 1953: 120; 49th rubái from the 5th edition published in 1889.

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